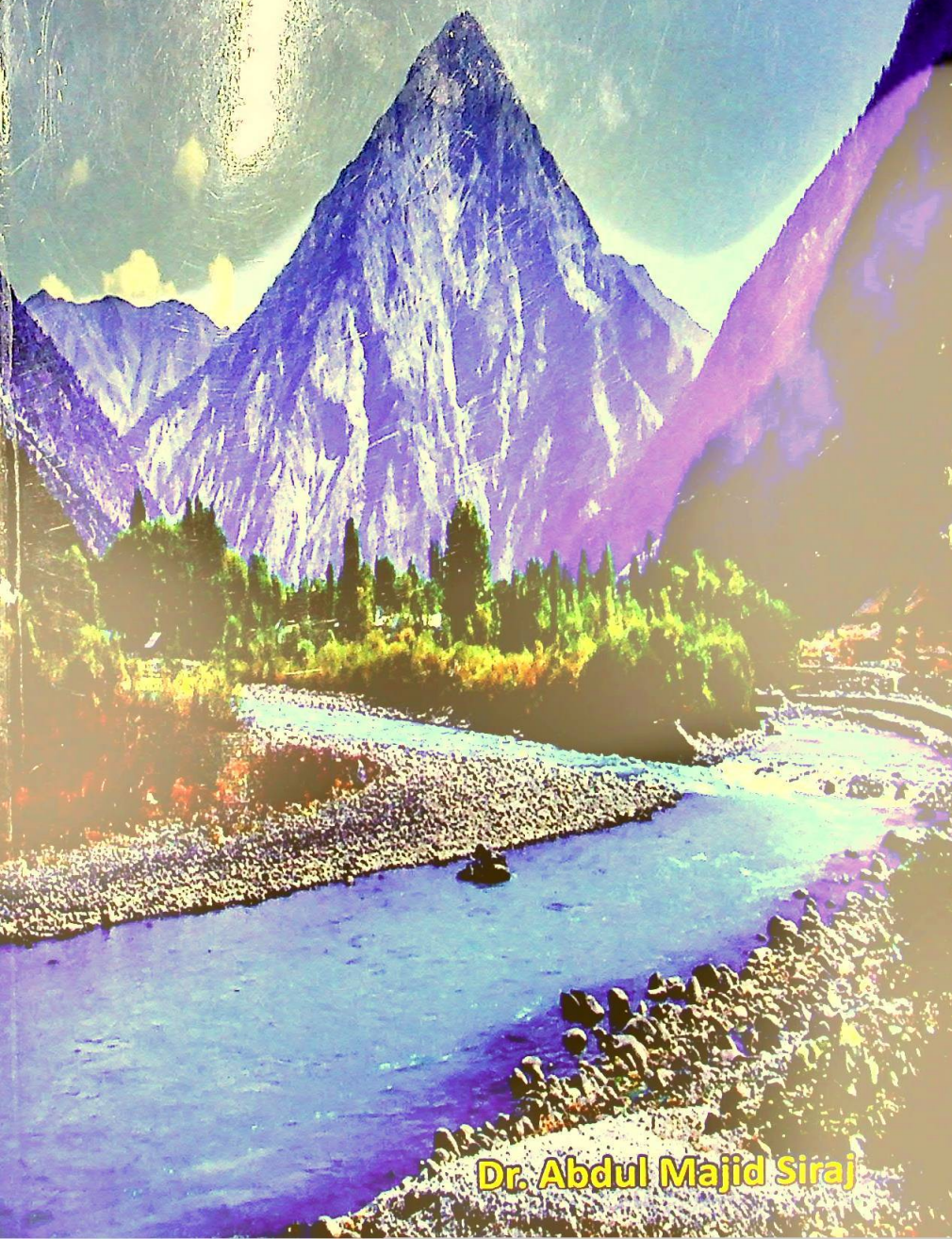


DOCTOR and THE MOUNTAINS



Dr. Abdul Majid Siraj

Prologue

2020 April time Corona pandemic has been announced to the world. I am confined in a house at the residence of my friend in Jammu. Not even a fully-fledged organism of its biological existence, the smallest strand of RNA covid-19 has brought the world to its knees. It was no different a victim as an individual human. I emerged into lockdown in my friend's house. This beautiful prison stimulated my urge to at least in nostalgia and submerge in days I spent in Gurez. Writing a book on Gurez was like turning the leaves over of a beautiful time of my life and for that reason; small details did not escape me and kept me company all these months. I resurrected notes I had made and that were archived over the years.

On the first day of my stay in this adopted home, I explored the house I was living in. Gentle warmth was caressing my face that urged me to climb the outside stairs and land on the roof. I stood facing a spectacle of a close-knit cluster of houses glued together in these backwaters of the old city of Jammu. For centuries this place known as Ustad Mohalla has been the nerve centre of Jammu. Ustad literally means a 'Teacher' and this patch was inhabited domain of educated people. Every house adjoins the other, linked by common standing walls and the neighborhood extends to the end of the estate.

Rooftops are flat open spaces used by tradition from older times for a myriad of activities. Ideally suited to fly kites or pigeons for fun and sport, Jammu comes to life in winters. I am thankful to my friend Farooq Mughal without whose help the project would not have taken off the ground.

One day last week my eyes were transfixed on a spotted fury cat perched on the fence with its one leg poking through the bars, ears pinned up and beady eyes focused on the squirrel that was darting in all directions to cajole the cat. The interplay of two animals displayed their instinctual traits. The hunting drive of the cat with a defensive instinct of the squirrel was the game they played. It was a show worth watching.

Away from this distraction, my mind was elsewhere seized with reflections from Gurez and the wildlife that surrounded me there. As the nostalgia gripped me with intensity, I made a decision to make a start and settle down to complete my book.



Northern Areas showing Dardistan

Doctor and The Mountains

Dr. Abdul Majid Siraj



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Doctor and The Mountains

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Chapter 1

Gurez

The total narrative that makes this book an interesting reading revolves round the exquisite diversity of the place and the epiphany of compulsions in unique ways of working through the interface of nature versus humanity. Razdhani to Haba Khatoon peaks stand proud as an edifice to the seventh heaven utopia we explore, and all the organic stories emerge and come to life when you live within a commune of demigods. If you ever wish to view attributes of Heaven or wish to listen from the sounds of a symphony that peace and serenity play in its ambience then you need to look no further from Gurez. This piece of Earth is the most coveted place in the entire Himalayan region. It is steeped in history, rich in cultural depth and wonderfully evocative with a *mélange* of beautiful assets. It is an epic of my life that surpassed my experience of all other beautiful places on Earth that I have known. They call Gurez in Kashmir 'paradise on Earth'. You need to live in this place even for a short holiday. On your first night, you wake up to the glory of dawn and breathe the air wafted in through your window. Your eyes feast on the views; your soul is filled with inspiration. Gurez grows on you as an experience you cherish.



The river Kishen Ganga bisects the valleys to reach Pakistan¹

Praise Be to Almighty God who crafted the world we live in and who left no detail unattended in order to paint the canvas of breathtaking beauty and the exhilarating landscape we witness in Gurez. In such places, all humanity is left extolling the virtues and enormity of His powers. I take pride in my turn of phrase writing a little poem and pay a tribute.

*Clambering peaks to mammoth heights
Testing enduring daunting hikes,
 Caverns and mountains you reside
 Angels, demons, humans alike,
Trekking up hills a joy of life
Spring in verve bounding drive,
 Mirth and glee sharing enduring
 Nature and people, a family close,
They live their lives and depart
Prayers and devotion not apart
 Hearts quiver eyes glow
 Bliss sublime wherever you go,
Awesome to bizarre, live and learn
Mores of Gurez bastion they earn.*

¹ J&K Tourism

In all planet Earth, there are chosen places where hermits go, submerge in prayers and devotion to God and live their lives blending with nature and ultimately die in those caves. Gurez is one such piece of heaven where the ephemeral beings blend with the spiritual. This valley is tucked in the offshoots of Himalayan Mountains unmatched by any other location in an accessible world. If there are places beyond human reach that do turn your soul to a rapturous trance, then that place must claim absolute divinity. This story is a revelation of my travails as a doctor in the business of helping nature to cure people of disease and relieve their suffering.

My inward delight came from not only in the returns you normally get for the job of a health worker but also perceive unseen joy working and living in an environment with the background of the beautiful artwork of nature and unpretentious good-natured people that inhabit it. You cannot but notice the egalitarian panorama of the goodness of nature that is shared by every household in Gurez. The legendary tales passed down through the lineage of the indigenous people make absorbing revelations that are hair-raising at times. It is a common belief with local folks that the mountains are potentially alive and have emotions like humans. They create havoc in anger or otherwise offer plenty in terms of energy, medicines, shelter and food. They are domineering and embrace the valleys to exhibit a remarkable personality with their awesome beauty. More than 40,000 people live

within this cluster of peaks that reach scary heights and act as four walls of a gigantic fortress.

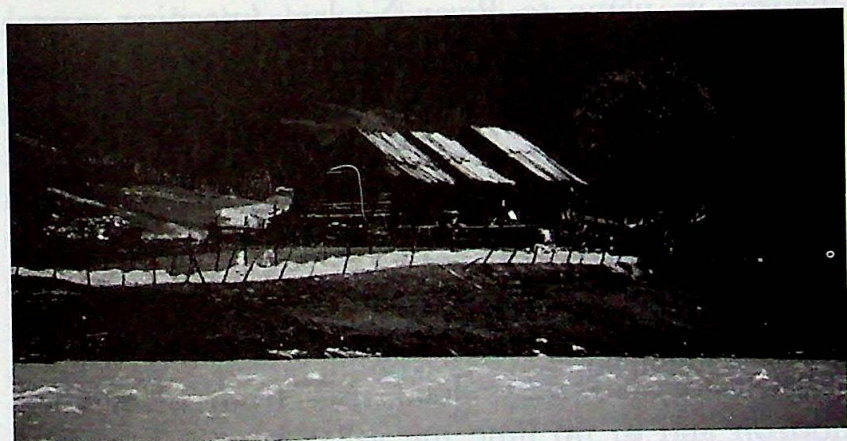
The uniqueness of the archaeological edifice and geography of Gurez is worth a look. The valley is a picturesque masterpiece of a complete landscape. It is one big bowl bisected by a river and fortified on a perimeter by Razdhani range and Haba Khatoon Mountain standing out in majestic eminence. The valley is bound on its western border by the Pakistan side of Neelam Valley and Sharada Peeth University. It is extending by passable roads Eastward to as far as Drass and beyond. On its north range Minimarg this beautiful stretch borders Baghtor. Gurez was the approach pathway to Silk Road and China; and Gilgit now with Pakistan. This route would lead to Central Asia Gilbefore continuing further to Kashgar.

The magnificent mountains flank on either side of the valley with steep ravines and exquisitely striking river bisecting the basin. The slopes and meadows are decorated with all types of trees including pines and conifers, lindens, walnut and willow trees. On a higher plain, the trees change to the bonfires range. The sharp edges of the precipice are covered with Alpine lodges and fir trees.

It is a forest treasure that also serves the local population for their needs of energy and shelter. You are drawn to this pageantry of nature's excellence like a magnet as you travel into the interior of foothills that are almost kissing each other when you first arrive.

Birds fly in formations, whizzing past and making music. Mountains talk to you with authority you dare not challenge and demigods evoke their awesome specter. The sound of the stream meandering through the village creating eddy flows serenade and entertain you. The crystal blue water in the stream turns glistening white as it strikes with vengeance the mighty rocks creating a pageantry spectacle. In my vain effort, I was stimulated to take a pencil and sketch and imagined I could produce a work of art because there were more than plenty of objects on offer.

In the basin of the valley are studded little wooden huts dispersed as snuggled formations in hamlets across a landscape.



2

Huts are constructed with logs of wood and Tung and Grove method used as joining and binding. No nail becomes necessary.

In winters the valley of Gurez is embellished even more with awesome surrounding peaks covered with snow and overlooking the gorges. The snow makes a hard crust and shines its brilliance. In summertime, the snow reflected like diamond clusters as the naked sun rays shine to light up the skyline. Beneath the permafrost water tributaries take birth and shape in formations by a merger of trickles of melting ice surfacing into springs. This water flows from underneath glaciers to reach the valleys and precipices. It provides the fount for the river that feeds the entire habitation alongside thousands of miles of countryside downstream to India and Pakistan. The basin receives the gusting blue exhilarating waters of the river known as Kishen Ganga in its journey through India and changes its name to River Neelam (meaning crystal blue), as it approaches Pakistan administered Kashmir. The River runs through the valleys to a length of 150 kilometers (93 miles) downstream to Pakistan. It bisects the valley in the middle, and all small hamlets of little villages are dotted along its banks.

You are subsumed in the brilliance of nature when a segment of dark grey cloud rises from behind the horizon and in no time the valley is overcast taking away the last of the glimmer of sun, like magic. A downpour gushing as a spectacle moment is caught in serendipity. The nightfall is even more fascinating if the twilight zone allows enough time to view because the sun ends to hide quickly beyond the horizon. The mountain demigods in turn, look over the meadows

and take in their fold the gushing white stream that traverses the valley. The sensation swoops over you. Take a walk anywhere near the jungle at sunset time the sounds of ruffling leaves, brings into view a twilight hue that has a weird aura to unfamiliar subjects. I asked a local man.

'Why do I get a spooky feeling as I walk into the forest at sundown?' A snide smile explained it all. He said.

'The trees get larger as you approach them and the hue reflected from a twilight sky changes the color of everything you see. In time you get used to the experience.'

Birds bring the message of changing seasons and are seen to scale the skies in formations. Geese or flying ducks cover the skies either migrating to or from Gurez make acrobatic exercises similar to Red Arrow air shows of the British air force. Birds that settle in the trees make music in harmony with nature. The woodpecker or Cuckoo or hoarse jungle crows are easy to comprehend, but I had a distinct belief they all responded to my presence to greet me or treat me as a distraction. I soon found a way to know that.

On a nice day with a free morning, I walked up to the trees and shouted at the top of my voice 'ravens' come down. I carried a bag of bread slices and flung pieces in the field. The birds swooped down in close proximity to me and claimed their share. The prize birds of Gurez seen decorating skies are the hermit thrush and the blue birds apart from the flying ducks.

Demigods within and birth of Gurez: Fact or Fiction?

Gurez is a cluster of mountains and valleys. Historiographers have been intrigued as they explore fascinating theories about the creation of this paradise. Hypotheses postulated have a fascinating appeal that people started to believe them. Maybe you do? Gurez taken as an ingredient of mother Earth was born back in the beginning of times many billions of years ago. Back then there were no continents, or mountains or associate landmasses. It was all water. Earth was submerged. In seismic movements as Earth rotates and moves on, segments of earth started to surface and each patch blended with another floating patch in water to shape the present-day continents of the world.

Two segments of Earth were nailed together by mountains acting as pegs. These mountain ranges underneath oceans surfaced from the crust of Earth. In this process water was trapped between mountains that became the inland sea and lakes. The enthusiastic geologists support the theory by discovering artifacts and stones in the foothills that are only found in the oceans. How did these objects get to mountains? Gurez was crafted by a series of mountains and their tributaries in a decorative design.

Earthquakes are common at points where the pieces of earth were joined together. These intersections became the fault-lines with high seismic activity. In this theory of creation, nature set in a process wherein fragments of planet earth pieced together formed large continents

and subcontinents. The shelves of repositories have piled up written literature that relates a different legendary version of the foundation of mother Earth including Gurez.

One hypothesis described Geo-science narrative that talks about the water bodies initiated life and humans who inhabited it. The desalinated water was made by filtration through mountains and life followed. Mountains of Gurez are deposits of silt and rock brought by tidal waves from the oceans is one such marvel of nature. Dry plain land was created by a process of erosion in the foothills shielded from snowdrifts, wind, falling rocks and avalanches. In the eons that followed the subcontinents and valleys were shaped to create the beautiful landscapes of the world.

In Hindu mythology, the whole region was a huge lake called Satisar and Nagas or snake people inhabited it. These people fearing the demon Jaladeo pray to Kashyp the Sage who goes into long penance to deliver the Naga. Shiva came down and with a hard blow created a crater in the mountains and drained the lakes to surface earth for people to live. A parallel legend makes rounds that King Solomon drained the water by ingenious canalization and surfaced earth.

As evidence there are passages in Holy Scripture and as mentioned above, geologists have discovered layered rocks and other artifacts in these mountains that are only found in sea beds even though the oceans are

thousands of miles away. Such discoveries support the above theory. Now you know why I feel proud to be a part of that marvel of genesis that God almighty made for us. The irresistible spiritual background lends support to my 'demigod' theory and the power harnessed within mountains.

I would like to pay a tribute to Gurez with that magnificent background history of its nativity and Divine Birth.

*A Piece from Heaven urging ways
Dazzling canyons, blissful maze*

*The Master architect works on oceans
Crafting continents, waves and motions*

*Beauty and power come rolling as one
Emotions surging with pain and fun*

*Behold the canyons what come in view
A glee what nature has all to give*



3

History of present geo-politics of Gurez

Present-day Valleys of Kashmir spin on a tumultuous contemporaneous political history. The subcontinent impacted on its back. 27th October 1947 is a day when Kashmir ceased to be independent. A war ensued between India and Pakistan two nascent nations for parts of this innocent oasis of Heaven. Gurez came just inside the Indian Territory. In the map of the world, Gurez is a part of Dardistan in the Northern Areas what constituted Balwaristan. Multiple passes cut through the mountain ranges permitting travel for trade and tourism with Central Asia. Gurez was an important station for a stopover and respite.

In order to elaborate on the geopolitical background, a look on the map reveals that Gurez was a part of a vast area like a nation-state located between the peaks of Hindu Kush range. As already stated this oasis with its tallest peaks of the roof of the world is a corridor that affords access to the *Kumori* pass to Astor and Central Asia. The route was used till 1947 for the transport of goods by traders through passes traversing the rugged contours of the Karakoram Range that spans 250 miles across the roof of the world. This mountain range consists of a proud display of 33 peaks touching the skies at 23,950 feet above sea level. Mount Austin (K2) is its Eastern limit and within its lap is nestled in Hisapur one of the longest glaciers of the world. The mighty Pamir converges in the North shielding its sanctity from Russians once known as the White-Bear. Russians at one point in history planned to enter Kashmir through *Khunjerab* pass in the foothills of

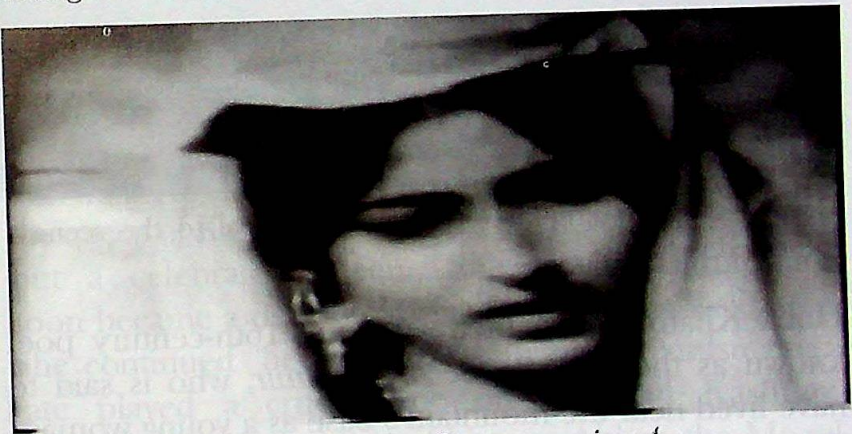
Pamir. It was a threat to the British Empire. It is for this reason, the British kept a distance from Kashmir to avoid the position to be as a frontline defense against the mighty white bear. British won Kashmir in a war from Ranjit Singh the ruler of Punjab but soon after sold it to the Dogras. The Himalayas are porous and the passes in the East give access into Chilas, Yasin, Chitral and Karakorum highway that reaches Tibet.

On its western border, Gurez is connected to Wakhan in Afghanistan through Mintaka pass. Afghans came in this way and ruled Kashmir from 1747 to 1819. The most well-known pass is the Zojila that starts at the junction of Haramukh and Nanga Parbat mountains and traversing through 11,300 feet high peaks into Baltistan. This territory is now administered by Pakistan and onwards by Tibet, Mongolia and India. Beautiful country chiseled away by neighboring powers for strategic value and territorial enlargement.

Chapter 2

Haba-Khatoon

Gurez and its glory are multi-dimensional. One striking feature is the Haba Khatoon Mountain. We have to make a special mention of this mountain because it shines beacon lights of profound culture and heritage. Haba Khatoon Mountain is an iconic, 13,000-feet, pyramid-shaped peak that occupies the skies rising like a citadel on the fringes of the basin.



The mighty Haba Khatoon stands out as an icon'

One peaceful afternoon on a random walk in Gurez I experienced a sense of epiphany and I stood still transfixed. I saw a fragment of low sable cloud arrive that hung like a shawl over the shoulders of Haba Khatoon Mountain. It was like a drape over a bride as if to hide her loveliness. *Did Haba Khatoon come alive?* Was it the *demigods from the mountain who decorated her?* The picture looked like a human

⁴ Image of Haba-Khatoon

silhouette magnified. Later in years it was a déjà vu spectacle for me when I witnessed a similar sequence in Cape Town South Arica and a similar copy of the Haba Khatoon experience appeared on Haramukh Mountain.⁵



Draped over Haramukh with cloud, identical to the scene I witnessed in Gurez⁶

Haba Khatoon is named after the 16th-century poet known as the *Nightingale of Kashmir*, who is said to have lived near the mountain's base as a young woman. The name Haba Khatoon features in folklore of Kashmiri culture and legacy. She was beautiful and left a legendary Sufi cultural treasure behind in her poetry and folklore. Even to this day her stories and poems are recited and sung. She was born in the year 1554 in the Saffron village of Chandhora. Her maiden name was Zoon or Zooni for her bright appearance and

⁵Op cit fn 7

⁶www.India.com Picture borrowed from the WS. A view of Haramukh from Razdhani top.

resemblance to moon. Her father Abuddi Rather was a poor peasant who married her very early in age to an illiterate peasant boy named Haba. That gave her the name Haba Khatoon.

Zooni had the natural gift for singing and making her own poems. She was ill-treated by her mother-in-law and husband because she spent most of her time in poetry and singing. She left home like a wandering diva absorbed in the wilderness of the countryside. A serendipitous moment caught. One day Yusuf Shah Chak the ruler of Kashmir monitouring the region He saw Habba Khatoon and stood watching her. He was captivated by her voice and instantly fell in love with her. He arranged her divorce to Haba and made her the queen of Kashmir. Zooni was no more a pleasant girl but a celebrated queen. She loved Kashmir and soon became a devotee lover of the King as well. She continued her devotion with poetry and singing. Fate played a cruel game on her and Kashmir. According to the archives of history, Akbar, the Mogul Emperor of India was obsessed with Kashmir and wanted to bring it in his fold of kingdom. In its entire history, Kashmir thus far was not a part of India. Akbar invaded Kashmir and on two occasions faced defeat at the hands of Chak rulers of Kashmir. This last attempt was conniving. Akbar by now a mighty force of India behind him hatched a plan. He invited Chak, the ruler of Kashmir for a peace treaty to sign in Delhi. Chak aware of the might of the Mogul Empire wanted to make peace and be a partner of the Empire.

He trusted the emperor and travelled to Delhi. He was arrested instantly in perfidy and imprisoned.

Communications were very primitive those days. No one in Kashmir knew when their king was returning. A surprise attack was launched in his absence and Kashmir was invaded by the Moguls on 5th June 1586 with a huge force comprising elephants and horses under the command of Mirza Kasim. The army in Kashmir was left bewildered and overwhelmed with an unexpected invasion. Mogul rule lasted the next two hundred years to 1752 AD. Yusuf Shah Chak died in Jail and is buried in Bihar.

As fate turned out her majesty, Haba Khatoon was again a wandering diva looking for Yusuf Shah Chak her beloved husband after he vanished from her life and Kashmir. Her poems have been published and passed down by the local scholars.

*In henna, I dyed my hands
When will he come?
I die while he roams distant lands
My heart is numb
O! Where is now the day's delight?
I have waited long
The golden were the cups of night
To him belong*

Haba Khatoon used to wander near the peak that now bears her name to look for her lover. After her

husband's death, she wandered the banks of a river in mourning. She died twenty years later by drowning into the Jhelum. Her tomb is at Athwajan in Kashmir.

She spent time in Gurez in the caves of the mountain. Haba Khatoon Mountain is the most beautiful peak where the great poetess and queen of Kashmir spent time. One of her song adopted for weddings is one she has sung going to the river with a clay pitcher on her head to fetch water for the in-laws. She dropped and broke the pot on the riverbank near village Ashoora. The story goes that after she dropped her pitcher of water and broke it a natural spring started gushing water. Today it has been earmarked. Then she sang her famous poem translated like when she appeals to her birth family;

Poem:

*Waerwean sith waar chas nov,
Chaare kar muen, malinov ho,
Ghaeri bi drayas aabi natis,
Noet mae futmoew, malinov ho,
Yaati detov naeti notaa,
Nate haari natie chae.*

The following is my concerted attempt at translation of a couplet from her poem that was written in native language.

man who knew a few words of English and was desperate to use his vocabulary. He approached me with long extended greetings.

'Salaam Alaykum, Sir! God bless you! You are well thought of round here. That house in the distance is my home, but I only own half of the house, my brother owns the other half of the property and he lives in Pakistan. The inside of the house is divided and we are not allowed to cross.'

We are now walking towards his house; others fell back to leave us to walk and talk undisturbed. In a wistful tone, I intercede preoccupied with the misfortune of adversarial politics that has marred the lives of these innocent people.

'Can you invite people from another side to weddings?' Eager to reply, he said:

'We have to give names and numbers to the local military here who in turn informs the other side. We invite them to share the meal as well.'

'Do you get married across the border?'

'No' was the prompt reply.

'Not even between close relative of families now separated.'

A smile on his face, he was about to relate a story that turned out to be an absorbing and romantic film script. I was eager to listen and agreed readily.

Looking all around to find his friend to share the story to get his help, he could not see him but managed to find his first words. He said.

Love story

'Around five years back, a young man from that house, at the end of the avenue with blue painted windows, was working on his vegetable patch and saw a girl on the Pakistan side. She was shuffling through the grass in the fields. He later met us and described her. Her hair and the tunic that half-covered her face blended gold brown and shone in the morning sun, he said. He was lured and started to wave at her fervently but did not get any response'.

My friend noticed my rapt attention and continued.

'The boy did not give up and made the ritual to spend hours every day at the same spot to catch a glimpse of his beloved whom he had never even spoken to. Eventually, the girl responded by making her presence a routine and started waving back. The two wrote letters in poetry and prose and exchanged gifts by catapulting them across.'

One day he managed to climb the fence at risk to his life and the love affair became well-known. Omar as was the name of our hero friend was given several warnings by the army not to attempt crossing through the concertina wire fence. The only predicament that plagued their chances to get together was that they belonged to two nations that were sworn enemies.

On one occasion he was suspected to be a militant and was shot but survived with a minor injury. The army having known about the affair since, the story earned their empathy.

I could not resist interrupting him.

'Was this story ever publicized in news media?'

'No'

'No Sir, news people are not allowed here' He said.

'In the end, Omar managed to cross the border. We later came to know that he had crossed the border with the help of the army by scaling those hills. The rumor was that he was planted as a double agent. His brief was to join the ranks of militants and work as an informer. He had agreed for the sole purpose of getting a chance to see his beloved. However, it wasn't as rosy as he thought it would be and he was arrested by Pakistan. He revealed his obsession for the girl. The girl, Sofia, had managed to walk over the hills to meet him at the border. She was found by Pakistani soldiers. The two were released and allowed to get married. The couple settled down in Pakistan, her home town, and sent messages back to our side of the border.'

After watching my keen eyes fixed on him and realizing my urge to know the rest of the tale, he ended my curiosity and said.

'Omar was sighted on social media and his family here was excited after they heard from him. The village celebrated his safety and marriage in Pakistan; they celebrated the fulfillment of his desire to be with the love of his life.'

'It is not known if Omar did play the part of a double agent of an informer because I think he would be useful to the army with his knowledge of local logistics and a wife from Pakistan.'

A fairy tale I thought, but my eyes were fixed on the border and Pakistan posts clearly visible.

'Surely, soldiers must be killing each other?'

'No sir' He was careful not to say too much.

'We have seen those men taking sweets to each other on festival days.'

I did not go as far as the border, but I was flabbergasted to know that a house stands on the line with its windows facing Pakistan. It is an affront to humanity; I thought that members of a family and a village fraternity can see each other across these dividing lines but cannot shake hands. In Tulail special amnesty orders are issued if a wedding or funeral has to cross to the other side. The tragedy of Kashmir's turmoil of 1947 witnessed wanton divisions of territory. These are the vagaries of human survival. My preceding portrayal of Gurez was what the place looked like at the time I contemplated my mission.

*"My beloved Gurez here I come to feast
Your paradise and meet your demigods"*

Chapter 3

MY POSTING

I shall share with you how fate in its rough and tumble mode steered me into Gurez. Hill duty was mandatory for all government employees including doctors working in government health services. The government directive dates back to old times. It was designed to ensure doctors and other officials remain in post serving in difficult terrain.

It was a two-year stint and the absolute nature of orders made it easy to endure the hardship expected in this assignment. All employees would only have done this duty once in total tenure of service. Those who liked the perks like doubled pay and allowances could offer for a second term on a voluntary basis. Living in mountains can be hazardous for personal safety because in the event the doctor himself falls ill he has to self treat and even appendicitis in winter months can be perilous. In summer months patients are transported on stretchers and foot the 40-mile trek to Bandipore.

My story dwells on the enormity of nature's bravura attributes and its beauty in some detail. For the local people, just one doctor in the small health centre was the only facility available to them. The Health Centre that is centrally located in the village Dower caters to a population of about 40,000 people spread over forty miles of human habitation. I am told that presently

there is a fully fledged hospital staffed and equipped with medical and administration services.

I have a compelling desire to share my memory of this era of the most fascinating stories culminating from episodes of adventures and serenade in a symphony of the peace and tranquility that the place offered. Extraordinary events overtaking one another sequentially make the narrative an anthology. It is for that reason the book can be read from page one as a complete story or a random page chosen as in any page of the book a new story may unravel. This was my first two years of practice as a doctor, consequently my naivety added spice to narrative.

An air of spirituality is in ambiance that felt universally and in my own experience I sensed the presence of a hand from the guardian angel unseen but tugging at my shoulders with navigational directives in travel and work. You are stood like the lone ranger contemplating an array of the majestic mountain ranges akin to another planet with a long view to infinity. The demigods of mountains show their presence. Serendipity for an artist, the daunting canyons, and dynamic streams meandering through valleys down at the depths of the precipice is extra-ordinary experience. This backdrop blends in with the valleys that offer earthly marvels decorated at the fringes by manicured formations of green forest that are breathtaking. In all this you look at earth to find your duty as a doctor steering in your face.

The concept of working in these conditions for a beginner is an imponderable thought in modern times and yet I will be ready to trade my entire life to work again in Gurez akin to those days. I would need to call upon all my physical reserves to cope and experience, and to translate my medical expertise to suit the prevailing conditions. Stories that travel from Gurez have absorbing folklore and built-in romance. They offer shelter to hermits in caves and inspiration to artist and poets in their pursuits to sketch and write.

Back home preparing for the job

I was unsure of myself, to be on my own in a faraway place. In order to get confidence, I sought advice. My idea of the medical profession was pure science and its application in practice. Amazingly when I sought advice, not a single word was said to me about ethical values our profession is supposed to claim. I thought a healer was revered as supreme in society mentioned in books of history.

In an ideal setting value in the practice of medicine carried ethereal rewards. Your duty is alleviating pain and suffering by working amongst fellow human beings and not just earning money. In Gurez I will be my own master and may perform miracles. This was my heartthrob and a challenge I loved. In contrast, my own life may be in danger. The stories of misadventures faced by my senior doctors were not going to dampen my enthusiasm. I will share with you in the following pages the lessons I received from seniors. In this discourse when the nobility of the profession wore off

and its altruistic theme waned with limited mention, I felt miniaturized. I felt my advisers trivialized the primary mission of our noble profession. I withstood these pressures and remained steadfast, reminding myself of the excellence I cherished in my medical college days.

I was on my last day at work in the main hospital. I was looking to search for advice from doctors who had returned from hill duty.

Hospital canteen

Mulling over my revelations while I sat sipping coffee in the hospital canteen, my friends joined me. My exile to the hills was news to some and an opportunity for other friends to offer advice, wanted and unwanted, useful or misguided.

‘Problems will come, they always do and in time you learn to get by’, said Dr. Sajjid who had already served the hill duty.

‘Remember you come first. You have to preserve yourself and your own comforts. Your subordinate staffs are important. They will guide you. They will pass on information what your predecessors would have ingrained into them. Even though you do not pay them they are domestic to you. You are expected to accept their subordination. The more senior of them help with your work. Do not ignore the advice they offer in handling difficult situations and handling stropky patients.’

I Listened to Sajjid and responded by touching the back of his hand placed on the table and before I said anything our mutual friend Dr. Tawkif pulled a chair and half stood to contribute his bit.

'I will say in summary that you have to may be give academic medicine in those conditions a back seat and learn gimmicks. Play safe and not indulge in adventuralism trying out new treatments. I always kept a witness when examining female patients.'

I nodded in affirmative. I realized I was sitting with my senior friends. I must pay attention. I asked.

'How do I get by in providing treatment, if facilities are primitive?'

Tawkif answered.

'Once a diagnosis is made you may need to revert to methods of treatment tried by older members of your staff. Once people realize you have done your best, they will accept consequences.' Sajjid interceded.

'You will need to accept reward, whatever form it takes. In these places cash is scarce. You get dry fruit and even live stock.' First to respond was Dr. Tawkif.

'Once people realize that you are sympathetic and sincere, the word spreads quickly and rewards will flow in and you will get used to accepting gracefully.'

While the two doctors seemed to enjoy showing off and trivialized my primary concerns for coping with medical problems, we had a welcome visitor. Dr. Shireen, house surgeon in the Obstetrics department

made an appearance. She came to my rescue. Commenting on my future days, she said, 'Your peaceful day may suddenly turn into a chaos.'

As she put her cup of coffee down she spoke with authority.

'I have never been out there but visualize casualties turning up with multiple injuries, or screaming with acute abdomen. You have no choice and only you have to make crucial decisions'.

'I realize that,' I intervened.

Turning a defiant look at the other two she pursed her lips into a contemptuous half smile and continued.

'Don't pay attention to money mongers. You have a responsible position for the first time in your life. You have charge of the welfare of sick people. You have limited resources and basic anesthesia facility. There may be a Boyles' machine but no anesthetist. You learn to intubate and use Ambo bag and teach unqualified staff to help you to administer anesthesia'. She looked at the other two for an agreement and continued.

'You will have a chance to perform minor operations, a chance to acquire experience and learn practical skills.'

My eyes wide open, I said.

'Thanks! That is reassuring.' and heaved a sigh.

A few moments passed when no one said anything. Shireen broke the spell and stood up taking a long sip with a slurp to finish the last drop in the cup.

'I must go. I have a patient in second stage labor and she must be screaming. She will take time to deliver. I have time. She is a primary gravida and her cervix was not dilated'.

I thought she was trying to give me a lesson in maternity and passing a tip in obstetrics. Her wandering eyes find mine as she stood to leave. She said.

'You will need to be innovative in Gurez and rely on your midwife. She may need your help with forceps or episiotomy and find methods to get by with limited resources. That will be your job satisfaction.'

'That sounds good, I will remember that. 'Thanks, Shireen' I said flashing a broad smile at her.

Dr. Tawkif was itching to say something only others talked him over but he had a chance now that Dr. Shireen had disappeared. He said:

'People will approach you for real-time problems of everyday life. These dealings may be outside your remit of responsibilities. You need a skill of using finesse to deal with situations.'

He was steering me in the face and edged forward so I can hear well.

'You may also have to face hair raising social problems that not for your asking you get involved with.' Tawkif related one such story. He said;

'One day this tall middle-aged man and a girl came late at night knocking on the door of my surgery. The man in a growly faltering voice said; 'This girl is my step-daughter,' putting a hand on her shoulder.

'And I am a bloody fool. It only happened once when my wife and my son were out shopping. She is pregnant from that sin. We want an abortion for her. I will pay you handsomely. Our family will be destroyed if it gets known. My wife died two years back. I married this girls' divorced mother. It was one-off isolated satanic moment. It will never happen again.'

Three way marriage

Tawkif noticed my interest as I leant forward to listen. He continued:

'I insisted I cannot do it, I have no equipment or the drugs I will need. She has missed two menstrual periods. That is advanced in pregnancy. He refused to leave my door and now threatened me with violence because that is what will happen to him when the village knows. I had a quick plan. I told him the girl will need at least her mother after the procedure. She is the biological mother and when she recovers from the initial shock she will agree to cooperate.' 'Mmmmm,' He made a sound. I said:

'You must get her in confidence'.

I explained, she may or may not forgive him for the sin but she will agree to keep it secret for the sake of her own daughter. It worked to plan. I got the family

together without the son. The girl married the son. In the end, his wife and the son from his dead ex-wife agreed and quick marriage was arranged between his son and pregnant stepdaughter. The deed was backdated with a bribe to the priest.

I was astounded. I asked:

‘Why back-dated?’

‘The birth will be too close to marriage’. He replied.

‘That is where my help was used. I talked about premature births making perfect babies.’ He quickly added:

‘The deed was predated to a date before the parents own wedding that fortunately was also recent. In such situations children get married first before the parents do. Custom treats children from both sides as brothers and sisters, but they can be married before parents decide to marry.’

‘Yes, a healthy boy was born. I was now a part of this triangle and helped the family. I declared the baby was premature 7 months old because that is how long they were married before the birth. The priest who wrote Nikah received a bribe to predate the document. The children are married before the parents are married. All fell in place. The baby looked like his father, a true genetic lineage and a happy ending and celebrations.’

I was intrigued and put spice on the story.

‘This was a case of two fathers in the household superimposed by a grandfather.’

I thought in this situation I would have put all my effort

into concluding the pregnancy.

‘But more important a narrow escape for me.’

On that story everyone left smiling, we concluded with usual courtesies and I made my exit mulling over the sequence of events in the story and wondering how I would have managed.

The stories of misadventures faced by my senior doctors were not going to dampen my enthusiasm. In this discourse when the nobility of the profession wore off and its altruistic theme waned with a limited mention on medical matters. I muttered to myself.

‘This is my chance. I will take the challenge. I will face thrills, medical and social problems thrown at me. I am young and strong and hardship will not overcome my pace in work or living.’

Home James, time to ponder

Laid in my bed all night long I gazed at the wooden tiles of my ceiling. I reveled on the prospect of practicing my skills and enjoy the feeling of rewards afterwards. May be these young medics were scare-mongering. I wanted to speak to a senior doctor.

I woke up and in my best suit I wandered out to the nearby medical shop of Dr Josef, a practitioner very well known in the neighborhood and our family doctor. He did not mind my intrusion because he felt thrilled to be an adviser to another doctor who is a novice just entering the profession.

Dr. Josef MD

Making sure no patient was waiting for that would make financial loss I ventured in, announcing myself with a polite courtesy.

'Good evening Dr Josef. I beg your indulgence and apologize for barging in your busy time'

'Oh; no no no; come on in old chap. I looked after your Mum when you were born and now you are a doctor like me. I am delighted: Ha Ha Ha Ha.'

I could feel his patronizing hints already entering my skin. I bowed down and said.

'I know you Dr Josef so well and my Mum sent me here to ask your guidance for my new posting to Gurez'.

Still half stood in his chair combing his short beard turned half grey with the end of his long fingers. He sat down properly. I could not help but notice that he was balding and few strands of hair disheveled and covering the crown of his head. His red tie knot was undone as if time was at premium preparing for the next victim of his lucrative practice. This time it was his free advice to a budding doctor uppermost in his mind. His payment will come when people see a well-groomed doctor walking out of his surgery. It will come with boosting of his image. I took my eyes off his overgrown nails conspicuous with a thin line rim of black very quickly so as not to draw his attention and asked him a point-blank question.

'Sir this is my first experience to be on my own facing public. I don't know what to expect?'

After that, he was unstoppable as he made a speech advising me on nitty-gritty basics of practice. He said: 'Now is your time to get some cash under your belt. You focus on financial gains, cash and kind so that when you finally return home, you are well provided'.

He looked amazed at my blank expression. Normally advice on how to make money would be received well. He knew I was from a middle-class affluent family. Nevertheless making money was a trend. Looking at doctors in the community and the cars they buy and designer clothes they show off all needed money. That is why his advice would make sense.

'Yes Sir, I am aware this venture is my first chance to earn.'

I knew with upsets and struggle in his life, ethics and altruism will not be uppermost in his mind. He seemed to read my mind and said:

'I know my boy at this stage of your life need for money will not enter your mind.' He looked at my clean white shirt and stripped grammar school tie that possibly made an impression.

'But remember this is your chance and make the best of the opportunity.'

He started grilling me on ways and means to adopt manipulative and deceptive methods as a part of private practice. I wanted to leave and made an excuse that his patients are waiting. He refused to let

me go and continued his sermon. I received advice to postpone ethics for later years and get used to corrupt methods in medical practice. As a first lesson he said:

'Your reward will come as soon as symptomatic relief is achieved. Play smart and use heavy pain relief even if that means you use steroids'. I interrupted.

'What happens when symptoms return? And failures in the treatment surface?'

His response to my disbelief was crisp.

'In practice, the disease will surface with rashes on the body or inside the mouth, a chesty cough or a more ominous sign like a stiff neck. A diagnosis becomes apparent. The action comes naturally with prescribing or referral. Never accept blame and say sorry'.

I was impressed and decided to hear him out patiently. He said:

'As a doctor, in their eyes you are infallible. Learn to turn your weakness round to your merit. Blame is not with you. It is poor compliance by the patient or the fake drugs in the market. It may be every excuse is untenable then at best the sins committed by the patient are in question.'

It was getting more amusing as a story than realistic advice. I ventured in:

'In the event, the victim is a known priest in the village and therefore not liable to sin. I may be stuck for an answer.'

'Religion is strong and ethereal prescriptions are easily accepted. That is a place of posting like far-flung regions of the mountains.'

So went on the saga of malpractice lessons on a lot of gimmickries and finesse in my dealing with prospective patients. Amazing innovative and deceptive methods used to practice were offered. For example, a bottle of normal saline is injected with tincture cadmium to color it red. A syringe full injected in the bum will be very impressive and will be charged for speedy treatment of illness. You will find as palliative it works and invariably brought relief.'

He noticed I made no notes and offered me scrap on his table if I wished to do so. I refused and he carried on.

'Vitamins are best for a placebo effect and an injection given as magical placebo effect and will make money.'

My adviser went on making revelations I subsumed only for the education of the mockery of my profession than any clinical value. I thought to myself while I listened to that to have full knowledge of gimmickry is useful only to positively abandon that practice in my dealing with patients. I was now paying full attention and pinned my ears in his direction. He noticed that. He went on:

'Having made a diagnosis of pregnancy, put your stethoscope on her belly and make a prediction that the baby in the womb is living, the fetal heart sounds are normal and sitting in the womb is a boy.'

A boy! I was taken aback not sure if I heard him correctly or did I miss science. Surely baby inside does not whisper through the stethoscope that 'I am a boy'? There was no ultrasound facility known in this part of the world. I wanted to learn more. I said.
'How the hell can I make that prophecy?'

My dilemma was not long-awaited. I listened.

'You say it is a boy and the whole room fills with joy and smiles will please you. At the delivery time if your diagnosis of the birth of a boy came true, a live lamb will be waiting to be delivered to your kitchen. Normally a run of daughters is followed by another daughter, but just this once may bring a boy, so you may use common sense. In the event it is a girl, contradicting your diagnosis, you contrive rehearsed answers.'

"The first three months are in the making of the sex of the baby. I got the signals of a boy. There are other factors that play a part. Normally my predictions do not fail me. Your baby was not formed initially as a girl. Girl chromosome overtook growth.'

You will not get the lamb delivered to your kitchen but you lose nothing.

A preposterous thought, I squirmed my lips and felt warm behind my ears

Thinking:

'Is this what they taught us in training years?'

He went on.

'Your diagnosis will average out as correct. In my own experience as a start, I made predictions of girls three times more often. Boys born outside prediction brought abundant happiness and the erring doctor was soon forgiven.'

Dr. Josef was getting excited giving me his tricks of the trade as if he was himself reliving those moments.

'3/4th of your visiting patients have the psycho-somatic illness. They are your best catch. It may be they suffer irritable bowel, stomach pain, palpitations, or fibromuscular pain or cramps, hysteria or depression.'

I felt relieved in a way that some medical problems were coming under discussion. I interrupted.

'These conditions are the most difficult to treat.' A big sigh came heaving his chest.

'You are right but they also become your best customers and long-lasting. They come outside hospital hours and never without a bag of dry fruit.

They respond to long conversations and medications of anti-anxiety medicines. Never tell them, there is nothing wrong with you. Watch that you are not caught out and panic even contemplate surgery. In Munching House syndrome you may find typical appendicitis symptoms replicated. Your clue comes from multiple scars from past operations.'

I was getting interested as new facts are emerging that will be useful. He continued.

'Just spend time giving them medical jargon. They may understand nothing but they are impressed. You are a fresh graduate; it will be easy for you. They may not understand you but they will pay you well impressed that you found them capable of understanding science. You are a real doctor, they will go home praising you' 'And always wear your clean white coat in consultation and surgery' He warned me.

He also alerted me to take my hospital staff in confidence. They know everything.

'Give them generous facilities; forgive their harmless fraud and corruption like selling medicines from hospital stores. They will come to your defense and save you from awkward situations.'

I realized taking staff in confidence was not a preposterous idea after all.

'This opportunity does not come when you enter the academic field. You may become a professor and write books but you will be living a mediocre lifestyle.' 'In this dispensary setup, there is not much else in it. You live in isolation from medical fraternity surrounded by hills and country with no social activities and no academic gains. The best hope is to return home loaded with cash and make a start in private practice'.

I thought God forbid if I end up a GP practitioner like Josef and lose all my aspiration and dreams; I would rather be a plumber. My ambition was to specialize

and spend my life at the top end of medical science. He sensed that his job to convert me was not done and continued with advice loaded narrative. He knew that I will be the only doctor looking after the healthcare of these innocent people. His advice given was with the best of intentions to a colleague and son of the lucrative client family. He did not realize that he did not make an impression on my young mind that was full of dreams. Perhaps I was not prepared yet for a role in public service. How dreary a life I thought will it be to end up as a back street practitioner selling the art of quackery?

His practice was a role model for any street practitioner.

I promised myself to never ever go into general practice and if I have a chance to promote reforms I will bring medical ethics into lime-light. I was now pre-occupied with my new venture of taking up the position of a medical officer. I was full of enthusiasm.

How do you predict my time in Gurez will play out with my noble motivation, we shall see?

In a rural setting like Gurez, my total time in and out of the hospital is there for taking for private practice and malpractice and available to earn. There was no fine line definable when official work stopped and the private practice began. It was a continuous doctor-

patient communion that could be rewarded at any time. As I found later the remuneration could be a bag of walnuts, rice or almonds if really pleased with the service. A special gift tucked under the examination table for the favor of fuller attention was common.

[May 10 2020. There is still no news about the resumption of air travel to Kashmir. I am conscious of the gratitude I feel about untainted hospitality. My host does not show an inkling of a sign that I am a hindrance in the family. I am served like a valued guest and a member of the household. I am encouraged to write.]

Chapter 4

My Odyssey

Fully equipped with the background knowledge about the work and place, I began to pack my bags, wondering if this is what I spent five years of my medical training for. On the night before departure, I grabbed my book on the practice of Medicine and Operative Surgery. I buried my head in these books and in between stared at the ceiling to small hours of the morning. The books were my bible and I had to learn a new subject of practicing my knowledge. I was searching for my identity because I had developed an idealistic relationship with my knowledge of medical science. That is where I started, by the side of my father's death bed. My best comfort came from the pages of the books as I turned them over. I thought they were the world for me.

The briefing was driven into me by my seniors already dented my imagination. I was now preparing my mind for new challenges. I was warned to avoid changing the system and exploit my new found opportunities for the benefit of myself and possibly fellow humans. In Rome, live as the Romans do. The honest and dedicated practice may be counter-productive. You need to have knowledge of gimmickry and use it. My ideals of altruism and spoken words in my ear from my father were on a cliff-hanger, but his words

reverberated in my mind as soon as I touched a low. I shall share with you. He said.

'My eyes are set on that door waiting for the doctor to arrive. I spend hours in agony with difficult breathing and coughing blood as you have seen'. The anguish my father expressed made me cry. He said.

'As soon as the doctor shows his face, I feel a glimpse of a new life. My hopes are revitalized. I smile and he smiles, even before we exchange a word'.

My father died of consumption. He believed that a doctor has the best opportunity to serve humanity. Doctors were revered in society and that was his other reason he became passionate in urging me to join the medical profession.

Departure & Farewell

On this early spring morning, I woke up to a drizzly day ahead and stepping out of warm bed, the chill in the air was rousing. I preferred to travel when it was cool outside. In normal times I shake boredom away by taking my car out for a spin and watch rain striking the windscreen making music. I like the rain showers clean the trees, houses and roads.

As my time for departure was drawing near I heard a commotion in the house with familiar voices of my relatives, and soon the house was full of people waiting to see me off. Trip to the mountains considered as an onerous undertaking deserved a proper send-off.

There were emotional outbursts, weeping and hugging before I managed to extricate myself and get ready for the journey. There was a feeling of a tug in my heart as I witnessed these scenes reminding me about times when someone in the family was departing for the pilgrimage to Mecca. In the old days the pilgrims were relegated to divinity with no regrets if they never return home. They were considered fortunate if the journey ended their life because all the travelers believed that if they died in the direction of Mecca on this sacred mission they would be admitted to Heaven.

In the past air travel was not available to common folks, so the journey to Hajj was performed travelling by ship from Bombay to Jeddah and then onwards distance on a camel back to Mecca. The pilgrimage lasted for many months. They had to survive the hot sun of Arabian Desert and the long voyage from Bombay. Invariably people died with natural causes and were thrown overboard or buried in sand.

Pilgrims surviving and returning after cherishing the feat would be received with a great ovation from the whole community. They now adopted a new identity as a *Hajji*. I am not making a comparison of my travel to my place of work to a pilgrimage. My departure, in contrast, was a different story with perhaps also facing hazards in travel but no aura of piety or spiritual exaltation. Nevertheless, today it was my day and a target of similar attention.

I remember I was conscious of being given a send off that was blown out of proportion. The rumblings were heard about the unusual posting to the remote part of Kashmir construed as a place in exile. Everyone I met had Gurez uppermost in mind and contributed bits of information about the place. Weird stories that came from the region and the dangers in the travel were circulating.

In the end, I detached myself from hugs and kisses from relatives seen with tears and red eyes. I ran to find a mirror in my room. I looked at my pathetic face and heavily puffed eyes. The experience drained me. I splashed water on my face to lighten the red glimmer in my eyes and forced a smile on my face before I dare face people outside again. I had no idea why a simple transfer to a place of work should create this pandemonium that stirred emotions all around. The main problem was communication. You may not see each other for many months or even talk to each other. There was little chance of telephonic contact and I had to rely on the old fashion letter writing to communicate. There was only the army telephone service possible for emergencies. Once inside the valley of Gurez, there will be little chance of returning back to civilization during winter months.

Saying farewell to my family and friends as i set off for my pilgrimage. I was inundated with prayers for everyone that In order to soften the hurt of the parting and in light humor I was reminded to get those famous chashmi *bulbul* socks for them when I returned emotionally charged

'We are all proud of you. I am sure you work hard to extol your noble profession and the status of a doctor.' I heard in that familiar voice from my older sister. Everyone said something or other and I thought it was time to say something to lighten the atmosphere and keep good humor. I Said

'Let me assure you that I am not a baby anymore and I know I am the first from our extended family to go so far out and earn a living. I will be a real doctor and serve. I will not disappoint you. That is my promise.' Noisy acclamations!

Bandipore

I was eventually on my way as the first step towards the long journey figuratively a spiritual quest heavy-hearted. I was also burdened with whatever I was advised in clothing and dry fruit for emergency sustenance filling my pockets. I was ushered in the coach waiting for departure. I was the last passenger to board but a suitable seat was reserved in advance and promptly vacated by my domestic who was sat in it as my proxy. Passengers sat in the coach looking at the big crowd skirting round to see me off raised eyebrows of curiosity. I waved farewell forcing a smile. The driver revved up noisily as if to join the parting spectacle before we finally set off.

As we made our way out of town, I heard whispering subdued. In breaking the awkward quietness I started conversing with people around me. They asked me

questions about where I was going. I was reluctant about disclosing my destination. I knew it will start a discussion on medical problems and yet I may have to give a tangible reason for my travel because of the crowd that saw me off and the number of bags as my luggage. In such a position now, I would have made up a story that I was visiting friends and kept my journey low key. Instead, I gave myself away and told them that I was a doctor posted to Gurez and that my first stop was Bandipore the 30-mile ride north where the coach will terminate.

The coach trundled through sharp corners before getting on the highway. I leaned back to rest my head hoping to revel on the deep philosophical journey of my mind turning a new leaf of my life. That was not going to happen because I was the focus of attention. Most of the travel mates were the residents of Bandipore and they just discovered an eye-catching passenger looking different and wearing western clothes. I was the focal point from now on to the end of the journey. As soon as I made the mistake of telling them that I was a doctor posted to Gurez, questions flew in my direction. I should have introduced myself as an official collecting taxes perhaps, or tell them I am a judicial magistrate posted to keep an eye on law and order. That would shut them up.

They empathized with me on the mammoth task of the trek over the mountains this time of the year. They all spoke taking turns or piped in over someone else.

They offered information about Gurez based on each one's own experience. I sat there as a focus of attention towards an unusual co-traveler for them. First time I felt like I was an outsider in my own country. They were dressed in local outfits like a white turban or a wrap over chador so different from me. They looked weather-beaten and rough-textured as expected for people travelling back to fields and working in all weather conditions. They took turns converging on me from all rows in the coach asking questions. The four-foot bus conductor squeezed the half tilted tip of his nose into wrinkles and his eyes squirmed emanating an appearance of an intelligent dwarf. He spoke. 'The road to Gurez is full of sharp bends and very narrows at places.'

He said.

'You will be climbing the short cuts already earmarked' When everyone was talking he interceded again trying to get some words edgewise to brag about his trip to Gurez. He held on to his old beret cap as he spoke and never seemed to stop speaking in his typical effusive manner. He eyed me frequently to see if I was impressed by his narrative. I was getting involved now with twenty-odd people conversing on my trip to Gurez commenting on my prospects of practicing medicine over there.

My one problem was possibly my looks. I gathered a telepathic unsaid impression that my fair complexion and trim exterior was construed as a sign of youngish starter in practice. In response unwittingly I was

twitching my shoulders bringing into prominence my physical features and strong muscles demonstrating my manhood. There was a man who stood out from the rest, spoke the least and seemed educated. He was a teacher with an understanding attitude. He interceded. 'The trek up to the mountains from Bandipore can be arduous if the weather turns rough but once across the passes you will enjoy the journey.'

I acknowledged with a nod that encouraged him to continue:

'Gurez hospital has been deprived of the services of a doctor for long periods of time'.

The young teacher was returning from his holiday and had worked in Gurez. He said:

'Education in Gurez was very basic but over the years has produced local scholars who wrote exemplary ballads and folklore subscribing to the cultural heritage of Kashmir'.

In order to keep me in good humor, they took turns in praising people of Gurez saying they would serve me well. I made remarks about honesty and efficiency in work and they readily believed me. They were critical of the doctors who served in the past, denouncing some of them as callous and greedy, from what they had heard. In the past, the only doctors available for these posts were diploma holders with only very basic knowledge of medicine. The driver interceded and made a sweeping statement about some doctors who served in Gurez in the past. Blowing his horn to warn mules crossing the road, he said:

'They floundered in practice and were keen on extracting money from the poor. Hospital supplies of medicines were charged claiming their property resulting in ruthless corruption.'

There was a moment of disquiet in the bus that made the driver slow down a little and shows an awkward grimace. Thus far I only knew that doctors were above reprimand and everyone as one in the medical fraternity behaved above par. It served as my first warning to tread my path through public dealing with all the finesse I have.

The silence held back comments for which I was grateful but the conversation set me thinking. How will they be talking about me in a year or two? I felt a blow on the pit of my stomach on the prospect of being a subject of gossip. At such low times, words reinforced by my father (May he rest in Peace) warned me many times over to resist the temptation to illicit gains and greed. He used to remain steadfast in my ultimate mission of relieving distress, and pain and the reward will come.

While I was ruminating over my past, the journey passed quicker than I thought and the bus turned a sharp bend to enter the station yard in Bandipore. That jerked me awake. The conductor sprung up alive, shouting orders to unload luggage. I was not even sure how many pieces I carried because there were some pieces added on after I was sat inside. I came down from the coach and looked around to scan the

surroundings. There was a subtle chilly breeze that I sensed coming from the nearby snow-capped mountains and even the air I breathed carried a refreshing aroma.

I was received by several people covered snug in a shawl they call *Chador* made locally from lamb's wool and cone-shaped caps, a typical headgear that everyone will use. They all together look like a contingent of Dad's army. Everyone had a smile on their rugged faces, bowed with salaam and said very little else and started looking for my luggage. No words were spoken about where they were taking me. They pushed past each other, trying to take charge of my luggage as it was unloaded from the coach. From now on, I am on my own. Every piece was intact and left in a neat pile on the road. I thought for a second what if they were scrambling in to rob me? In seconds they carried all pieces and left me stunned and alone on the road. I woke up to the situation and took quick steps to keep close to the party. I turned back at the crowd in the coach now thinned out and waved goodbye. I noticed my bags had gone. I grabbed the arm of the older person who lagged behind others and asked him an important question:

'Where are we going?'

'Mr. Joo, the Village Head sir. He is the most respected of all in the village, and we are his servants.'

Feeling reassured I felt I must not sound ignorant and nodded to agree with him. I said

'Oh I know Mr. Joo is my host for the night. Thank you for the reception'

This was arranged by the local health office. I replied, rather loud, so as to assert my authority with full knowledge of the honor of being invited as a special guest;

I have never been in situations like this before, not sure if I must be assertive or show civility in my manner. I was complex ridden and learning on the job. A doctor was ranked elite in society those days but only in reverence, the real power resided with executives in administration, revenue and judiciary. They are feared. They can lock people up and administer fake justice by bearing down on them and then offer relief against a bribe. Doctors earn respect with help they offer. On the other hand in tackling police, it is common for people to keep some cash available so when they get apprehended, they can bail out with a bribe.

Stood on the verge of the hill facing the village and the journey I felt washed out, but I found the energy to follow the endless walking entourage to the house of Mr. Joo, my host, They walked at their normal pace, but I was almost running to keep up with them. My luggage soon disappeared out of sight. I did not know the place or the men I was chasing. That was bewilderment and scary for me. For all, I knew I could have been taken for a ride by a bunch of thugs and once they out-paced me, they would run away with my belongings. A wild thought did strike my mind. If I lost my luggage I would have to return home and start

all over again. My fears were dispelled, as I sighted the last of the porters in the distance. I reassured myself that it was the duty of estates in the medical department to make arrangements for my stay in this place through the local dispensary staff. There are no hotels anywhere in this area. So far, I could only see beautiful desolation and demure human beings. Some stray dogs ferreting in waste ignored passersby.

I entered Bandipore village or a township as we know it today. Those days there were no cars seen anywhere and as if by instinct I prepared myself to keep my legs strong as the means of transport and just walk. Having walked what I thought a mile or so I asked the man in front for the second time;

‘How far more do we walk?’

‘Just a few more minutes walk. It is nothing. We make it to town many times every day sir.’

We had been trundling on a rough country road for almost fifteen minutes, and these guys with luggage on the back did not wince.

We must have walked some three miles more through desolate alleyways before we arrived at a cliff-hanger that looked like a sudden shelf of open land with a view of the bowl of the valley below. I stopped to take a stock of the valley. The panoramic view was a feast for my eyes. I saw an expanse of thatched roofs in the depths of the valley below only limited by the horizon where mountains melted into the sky. There was no cloud and the glint of sunshine gave it the bronze highlights to complete the masterpiece. A dense row

of trees marked out each hamlet that comprised of a close-knit cobweb of houses interspersed by large fields with the luscious green crop. We climbed down the slope and finally arrived at the house of my host for my overnight stay. I was greeted at the door by a seemingly head servant wearing an oversized turban covering both ears.

‘Salam Alaykum Huz (Sir) Mr. Joo is expecting you earnestly’. Looking at members of my entourage with a steering gaze, he said

‘These servants are brutes, so forgive them if they have been impertinent and not served you well. I hope they have carried all your bags without any damage, Sir.’

Eying the cluster of my entourage with stern eyes, he said

‘If they made any trouble sir or did not serve you well; I will whip them in your presence’.

It was beyond my belief to witness physical punishment inflicted on mortal humans for my sake. They may be disadvantaged as indigent, but they are still human beings. I understood his motive was more to show off his authority than a care to keep discipline. Who says Kashmir society is secular and equitable? Lower class people are happy at lower class treatment.

‘Go away and disappear’. The chief servant ordered them. ‘Take the luggage to the guest room on the top floor’.

‘Sir’, they said all at once and quickly scuttled away. Nevertheless, I was truly impressed with his hold on his

line of command in domestic management. In more liberated parts like the capital city, the domestic staff will not take this arrogance lightly. Nevertheless, I woke up to the occasion and said;

‘Greetings of the day’

I made sure I stood firm and looked important. I continued facing the porters; ‘You were all very good’ Looking at their pathetic faces, still with a smile, I said; ‘There is no need to whip anyone.’

Waiting a while to receive a response like a smile or a smirk, that never came, I repeated and continued.

‘They were all good and chaperoned me through all the way here. Thank you for sending them to receive me.’

I was conscious that my voice was getting loud. There was no need for that I instantly thought and felt humbled. In a lower tone, I said.

‘I will see Mr. Joo if you lead me the way.’

I was the honored guest at the house of Mr. Joo, the *Numberdar* or the village head in Bandipore, where I spent the night in preparation for the long trek over the mountains in the morning. This was the base station where all arrangements for food and clothing are made. I was in luck that the post-man who travels twice a week across to Gurez was prepared to be my guide. He was the best man for the job. He had an experience of the mountains and hazards of the trek that no one else could claim. He did this job on regular basis and got paid. He made a name for himself as an expert guide.

The horde of domestics at the tallest house of the village disappeared as I was received by Mr. Joo. I was ushered in the lounge that looked ornate with green walls, wooden columns and small windows painted white. Joo stood up with difficulty from his makeshift throne that comprised of a folded mattress and several velvet cushions. He greeted me with a warm embrace. I could smell the rose-tinted scent.

'You are the young doctor posted in Gurez,' He said in a patronizing manner.

'You are so different from other doctors that travelled to Gurez. I compliment you for your vibrant personality. I know you will be so much better than others'.

I could feel a red spot on my cheeks with embarrassment that bothered me. I summed up courage to stand up to this challenge to my authority.

Who does he think he is? I thought: An illiterate villager wielding authority on local innocent folks. He was no match to me. I am a qualified doctor facing him. I made no attempt to convey my feelings, conscious of my status as a guest. Instead! I said.

'Salam Mr. Joo; It is so nice to have met you. I have heard so much about you, about how generous you are and how kind to your people.'

I thought that will be the reply he deserves. He received the complement without getting red cheeks like I did.

His remark, about my personality could be construed as my young looks and lack of experience.

Joo hesitated to sense my feeling of unease and completed his remark;

'Doctors posted here are usually older people'. I knew instantly people here are kind and sincere, but they are also naive with a background of basic propriety and mannerism. Being polite would not enter their mind. They are either full of respect and stand in awe or palls as equal or downright rude. I felt I have to change my image by changing my looks and asserting my position. How do I show off my personality and performance? Instantly my mind was working at the idea of hosting a beard. If all that did not suffice, I could also wear a thick rim spectacle to rest on my nose. Awakened from my day-dream by a loud snort from Joo, I replied rather brusquely:

'I am pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Joo. I am sure I will meet your expectations when I start work. I am a medical graduate with merit and you will be pleased to know I was bestowed a distinction when I qualified. I have knowledge of my subject through vigorous training that will support my dedicated effort. My youthful looks will not be a bother; I assure you.'

Joo twirled his moustaches; I perceived possibly a tic to show his appreciation.

My experience in the hospital was mainly in surgery, and a beard was not appreciated in operating theatres. Wearing a mask over a thick beard would be problematic. I think I left Joo reasonably impressed. He nodded graciously to be addressed by name. In the meantime we heard the noise from servants at the door arguing about who goes in first with tea. It was a

pleasant surprise and a relief to witness a servant emerges with the samovar. I was ready for a break. I focused on the fuming samovar waiting for it to pour the local brew of tea. It was black tea with saffron flavor. A few rapid sips were refreshing. I was not given the choice of sugar in the tea or how much to add. Nevertheless, the brew was well prepared famous *Kahwa*. It contained saffron and cadmium that spread an aroma in the room. The typical bagel type bread was crisp, still warm from fresh baking.

After the tea and the bagel, I perked up in this new environment. I sat down with a round and large round cushion to support my back and a soft blanket on my knees. I now felt quite at home. I looked out of the window to a view of the scenic mountains boosting my spirits. I decided after a further rest and chat, I will venture out to browse outside and explore. The evening was drawing in and it was so pleasant I could not resist. I said to my host.

'It is a pleasant afternoon outside; I would like to take a walk'. Joo seemed eager to accept and offered a chaperon.

Joo's village

I needed to explore the singularities of this bravura hamlet of a new world for me. I was offered an escort that I politely declined because I wanted to look around and wonder at leisure. I was warned not to get lost in the maze of a network of paths because all mud

huts in these tiny hamlets were identical and there are no signs at crossroads and no numbers on the houses. Mr. Joo cautioned me not to get too embarrassed if the resident population came out of their homes snooping at you or peeped through their windows to take a look at you. He said,

'People will speak to you. Enjoy the sense of humor. They mean well. The local accent will sound very pleasant.'

Keeping his eyes focused on the outside through the window, he said.

'This village is a small hamlet in Bandipore, and they already know you are here. There are no telephones here but news travels faster than a telephone. They do not see strangers that often and their excitement will be witnessing a young doctor from the city in their midst walking like an ordinary man.'

I was pleased with that introduction and shook his hand.

'Thank you so much. I will be back as soon as possible and rest assure all in one piece.'

Having absorbed all the advice I was given, I wandered out like an explorer not knowing if I must keep my head still and only look ahead or assume airs of importance or nod reservedly in all directions with a forced smile. Was I entering a foreign country? I had to convince myself that I was integral to this society. In the end, it was well worth the effort. I wanted to be as friendly as possible to people I met and to assume a befitting demeanor. I promised myself to be at ease and normal. I walked directly into the interior of this

village. It was not for long because I soon realized that no special effort was necessary and became friends with everyone. I managed to be the first to speak taking mental notes at every turn of the pathways, so I find my way back.

Muhul-Kunz

I stopped and watched a couple of young women wearing a long robe tied around the waist by a scarf and a blush on their cheeks. The hard work they put in pounding away rice to de-husk the crop in the huge stone vessel and two wooden pestles (*Muhul-Kunz*) in rhythmic turns so fast that it left me wondering why the pestles do not collide and result in havoc. Held spellbound I was truly scared that I will cause disaster because both girls were turning towards me with a fixed gaze while pounding away at speed. How do they know when to pummel. The rhythm was precisely guided by sound and reflexes.

An amazing experience not only to see such a pair of pretty young ladies making hard work look so easy, but while they take their eyes off the job, they kept the rhythm and did not falter. They were humming something in tune with pounding, but that subsided into a whisper while I stood there like a buffoon in the middle of their front garden. I was conscious that I was not trespassing because that was the common path as well as their backyard. I was recovering from this encounter, frozen in a momentary daze only woken by the pair of piercing eyes peeping out of the smallest

window I have ever seen. I saw the rest of this amazing person when she emerged from the house and dared me with a look directly into my eyes. I recovered instantly when I saw this old granny. She was so tiny I could lift her with my left hand. She smiled to greet me. Her face was like a dried fig with deep furrows on either side of her weathered face. She kept her gaze at me. In local dialect she said;

'Er sir; we see no strangers in these parts often. Are you the doctor, Joo has put up? You are a young man and good looking at that. Doctors working round here are from old stock!'

I could feel her two beady eyes measuring me up. This encounter was a momentary jerk of my composure unable to decipher if I was just insulted or complimented by the granny. She must have only seen bald and grumpy older men in medical practice. I thought, but she was such a pleasant person I forgot what she said and impetuously greeted her.

'Good Day, my lady; Nice to see you. Yes, I stopped for the night at Mr. Joo and shall be travelling to Gurez in the morning.'

I was fascinated by her warm, jovial accent. She said: 'While you are here doctor, will you have a look at the small of my back? It is locked in a cramp when I wake up in the mornings. I sleep on a hard floor and take time to stand. It gets better as the day will pass'. She was interrupted by one of the girls saying laughingly:

'You need a new back Mamma: Leave the man alone.'

That remark set the two girls giggling and took all my attention.

I was captivated by the girl's voice. She had come to my defense, and I sensed an urge to show her that I was grateful. I could say thank you that made her stop pounding and listen, but I never did say anything. I wish I had. I composed myself and replied to the granny:

'I have been posted to Gurez. I will be pleased to see you if you ever make the journey. This is my first job, and I hope to work as hard as your two daughters'

She interrupted sharply and said:

'Granddaughters; they are my babies but I train them well'.

I thought let me get a word in as a doctor. Ever since I qualified I always somehow brought medical jargon in every ordinary conversation. I soon learnt it was not a practice appreciated at every occasion. It was a little pompous to say the least. This once I found myself driven in to show off, just to draw attention. I said:

'I can see your grand-daughters are well trained. That exercise will do them good. It keeps them in good health and they don't need a doctor like me'.

I was talking to Granny but kept my eyes elsewhere. The girls never stopped giggling and what a melody that made for me. They were still pounding. I must not carry on, I thought! It may stimulate a gossip in

the first hour of my posting in these parts. Hoping that will impress the granny and pass a good word about me. I walked away daydreaming.

The two young lasses were like hawks still alive in my mind. Day dreaming, I wished this old woman collapsed just where she was stood beside her front door and surrounded by assorted poultry and swooned with a heart attack that would look like she was dead. I would run to her help and revive her with a thump on her chest and make her breathe with mouth to mouth kiss of life. I would show her giggling girls how much of a real doctor I was, a hero who saved Granny's life. That would stop the girly sniggering and instead look at me as a real young doctor. I was lost in thought and in my reverie; I tripped over a pothole and snapped back to reality looking for my way ahead. The old woman at a guess was a hundred and she, unfortunately, disappointed me by exhibiting no signs of a frail demeanor with any chance of a heart attack.

As I turned the corner, I looked back. I forced an awkward gimmicky gesture at the tough nut and raised my left hand to suggest a goodbye but noticed with a half glance that the girls were back to work and one of them managed to shake the lock of her dark hair out of the way from her face to make sure I saw her profile, or so I thought in my muse. I walked away thinking that there are times such as these when to be ordinary folk and level with such beautiful people would be

preferred to the position of a doctor. As a common village boy, I would have stayed with old granny a bit longer.

Still exploring with enthusiasm, I meandered through the narrow alleyways and was now getting worried if I was on the right track in the maze. I started revising mental notes of landmarks, calling upon my navigational skills. Just before I met the old lady and the girls, a misty reminiscence of objects like an old rug left out to dry in the yard, a steep roof of mud and bark from conifer trees fixed on to the front door all came to memory. Further back was the conspicuous mosque with daffodils growing exuberantly on the dry masonry wall enclosing the mosque and covered over by mud plaster. I retraced my steps having got me lost, and by this time even the two girls had withdrawn to their home.

I got some navigational help from some boys in one of these multiple squares. They were playing games with marbles flicking them in holes in the ground. I was the oddity that amused everyone and the boys were no exception. I was warned in advance about the attention I would get but the reaction I aroused in the animals as I walked left me agog with amazement. For example, I noticed the chicken scurried away, the cows mooed, and goats left to feed and climbed trees to grab a leaf or two and ponies fled at speed when they all saw me approach. The local folk frolic amidst these animals did not seem to stir them. The animals know the humans in their commune. I was a stranger to the

animals surprised me. Something else that amazed me was how the chicken, goat, pony or duck know where to go for the night or how did the owners know their stock. They look alike, each breed of livestock.

It was most amusing to see the layout of these hamlets and architecture of houses made in biblical times when no one except possibly the rulers could read or write. Even today each feature will compete with housing built with comforts of modernity in mind. The uppermost in their mind was protection from inclement weather and ease of excess.

Communal living as a cluster and close together is an animal instinctual singularity of all living organisms, and even though each family does put a scent of possession around their territory, building walls of isolation from each other is more a trait of emancipated human civilization. Taking a lead from ants who build a den and a commune and allocating jobs to worker ants and the queen, people in Bandipore live as one family. The concept of privacy and isolation does not feature. It made you wonder when their connubial obligations and intimate moments get space.

This little township has its own characteristics that were quite a revelation for me. Bandipore is the last of the civilization that has filtered through modernity coming from the capital city of Kashmir. You get educated here about the ordeal of trekking snowbound mountains. It has a long history passed down by word of mouth in the form of legendary folklore. Time seemed to have moved very slowly.

A painter would not have put more order to the layout of these groups of mud huts that face each other in a semi-circle or square, so they share a common courtyard and their front doors open in direct view of their neighbor. As I said, privacy is not a desired propriety in social setting here because everyone in this town considers information on other inhabitants as their own business.

Passing by, they call out their name informally and enter homes and work places without a knock on the door like:

‘Mahamadu, Where are you?’ and without waiting for an answer find a place to sit down. They start conversing.

‘I had a trying day in the fields’ He says;

‘Give us a glass of water.’

The little girl brings the drink from out of the earthenware pitcher. This drink is always cool and refreshing.

‘How is Granddad? His coughing concerned me last time I saw him.’ ‘He is still smoking as I see.’

‘What else is there to do?’

The man from somewhere in the room replied with the end of Shisha still held between his teeth.

‘The smoke passes through the water taking the poison away. The tinted water is changed frequently’. The conversation ends when the Samovar arrives.

They offer salaams and good wishes at all times. There is only space enough to accommodate the family

and the livestock; it is therefore not possible to entertain a visitor and still keep privacy. As a part of nature, therefore, everyone lives in a commune-like a stock or a drove of humans. It is amazing that in such close contact there is no crime; if a little gold is stashed away for the daughter's wedding, a hole is dug at the top end of the communal room where the treasure is stored, and a small rug decorates it for the head of the family to sit on, covering the treasure. This is usually an open secret and when the tragedy of the passing away of the man or woman occurs the hidden repository is uncovered in front of the village elders.

A woman in labor pains getting nearer to birth will cry loud within hearing distance of the neighbors. From then on it becomes the business of every member of the community to lend a hand till such time the baby is born. The local midwife will get the message by the commotion and rush towards the house and while running order soap and herbs and rush advance party to boil water. There are no telephones, telegraph or postal services except a solitary postman who collects his bag from the transport bus. The midwife will start shouting to complement the stir in the air and order all men out of the house.

As I learnt later, the soap makes the two fingers she uses to lubricate the procedure to widen the birth canal. A procedure called *ironing*. As the head of the baby is emerging this process of ironing continues to the point when the head emerged. One great push by the mother usually succeeds and the village is excited

as they hear the first cry. It is at times when the breach babies and difficult births are announced that panic rings out, and life in the village is put on hold. The total youth assembles to volunteer to make a stretcher in seconds and carry the woman to the hospital. The relatives are usually spared the trouble; it is the young men in the village who volunteer.

Courting couples may need to sneak in during working times to be alone in their one-room home when all others are out at work in the fields. It may be one of the natures' ways for family planning. It is a true revelation that as civilization entered these homes out of the many scourges that besieged their lives liken diseases; competing for mod cons, they lose benefits of close compact family units. They build more rooms and more babies are born who become shareholders of the fragments of land, and that gets reduced to small units.

Youngsters migrate to cities for jobs and come home after many months with money and gifts. The other problems with the change in lifestyle are using transport to replace walking, importing unhealthy food and money related to corrupt practices, and bad habits. In the pace at which these changes happen, they lose their community spirit and human cohesiveness. The ill person may require outside help or use their own resources with very little help from the community.

Mud and straw is the mainstay building material for rendering and plastering. The thatched roof and small

windows and mud masonry provide insulation that even triple glazing would fail to match. The bricks are unbaked and made on site. The huts are identical so that the sun shines on them all in an egalitarian measure, meaning they are the same height and dimensions. Each house has a display of some remarkable graffiti to serve as makeshift nameplates drawn on the light blue walls.

Once a year, preparing for the Eid day, the whole family joins and render with mud plaster on the outside and inside. They then get blue ink and mixed with special clay cover the whole house. The hue of light blue color is universal and no different to the next-door house. This emulsion is the mainstay of redecorating the house twice in a year to correspond with Eid days and whenever there is a wedding in the family. The houses look so similar, it is a wonder how the chickens find their way home without straying to the neighbor's pen, and their livestock look so identical that it is amazing how their owners find them. The animals are a part of the life they live as a close community. The common yard is home to cows and chicken owned by different households. People are seen emerging out of their homes, corn stores and commonplaces of worship all the time and every time they make contact they say salaam to each time even at the first contact ever.

Everyone helps to keep an eye on each others' total assets. An outsider has no chance to dare enter the village not least to thief. Thieves go to cities. It is

impossible for the stranger to walk in the village without being noticed and questioned. There is consequently no need for a bobby on the beat and no policeman ever enters the village except for chasing a political militant. This has created problems in the recent past. Some boys from other parts were caught here and killed. It had a ripple effect, and sympathetic revolutionaries were recruited in escalating military actions.

The turmoil was yet to descend on this God's facile people and thank God I was roaming free and absorbing this oasis of utopian showpiece of humanity. There is a dark side to this story. The paucity of space and resources obliges young people to migrate and a constant exodus causes urbanization of beautiful rural scenery.

Did Moses ever get here?

The Jewish connection with Kashmir is interesting to theology researchers. The artifacts are too significant to ignore. The theory stands still at locating places where Moses may have stopped. There are landmarks ascribed to the hypothesis present to this day. Moses has been known to have led the fleeing Israeli tribes to Kashmir for safety. This fable passed down as an attractive story but the shrine has written evidence in books that Baba Dawood Khaki a Sufi devotee inhabited in one such shrine. This name was given to *Mount Nebo* in the Old Testament. The story provides a glimpse of Old Testament parable that

Moses led Jews away from the treachery of Egyptian pharaohs. Some immigrant Jews may have settled in Kashmir. They carried a reputation of nobility and wisdom through posterity and some of these antics are visible today. That is why so many people with integrity and knowledge who have respect in the Kashmiri society are called *Joo* even today, a semantic derivative from the word *Jew*. One such *Joo* is the Numberdar of the village who is hosting me for the night. I came back after a tour of this village that I enjoyed immensely. Mulling over Jewish connections I kept looking at Mr. *Joo*'s nose and cheekbones that made my host a little uncomfortable.

Joo has a remarkable nose! Surely can this be an only coincidence? People who bear a hump on the nose like *Joo* as his nose bore the mark of high bridge characteristic of Jews. In light humor aspersions on Jews to be misers became popular gossip. They joke about the long nose that helps them sniff the air that is free. One more fable in circulation is that Jews are miserly and long nose helps to sniff neighbor's food that is also free. It may be Jews and money are correlated, that is why the world assets are in the custody of big names like Rothschild family and the comic story in circulation that they are extra careful spenders of money may be true. Old people bear testimony to Jewish fetish for hoarding. In such families, a cask of clay pot contains silver coins from granddad time. I hope my host Mr. *Joo* is generous with his hospitality while I am his guest?

Numberdars were in old days an extension of the strong but greedy arm of law enforcing agencies. The autocratic Maharaja responsible for the realization of the lion's share of crops from people in his village pampered some individuals to act as a conduit. People would have despised him now that Maharaja was relegated to history but he still commanded respect because he was rich and the air of power was visible like a halo around him. The father of my host was also a Joo that is why he must be a descendent of that order! I was back at the house after an educational merry go tour of the village. Joo sat with me advising me on the evils of the treacherous mountains in my expedition the next morning.

'I have arranged a guide who is the best you can get. Abdul is the postman who makes this journey every week. He has survived the journey for the last ten years and I have faith in his expertise as a guide. We will pay him adequately and that in itself is service towards a good cause. He is known to everyone and we trust him. He will make a good cup of tea for you and also a sandwiches my kitchen staff have prepared for you'.

Joo looked at me as he noticed I was impressed with the arrangement. It was for real I thought with the journey and anticipation of challenges ahead. I was getting a little nervy. He noticed my composure and therefore tried to lighten the subject. He said:

'Properly prepared you will be there with no problems. Abdul is a funny old dog and he will amuse you with his stories. He will not stop talking but you can put breaks on him and order him to shut up. He has been warned'.

I managed to smile at this but without instilling fear inside me of the experience in the journey ahead I absorbed information. Every word said was nevertheless educational in many respects. I settled to listen and never took my eyes off his face for eye contact. My knowledge of anthropology is scant to interpret interesting features of his face but as explained later he had distinct Jewish features.

Joo was a man with huge shoulders on which stood his oval head, square jaws and a humped long nose. He was I guessed a young seventy years old. He wore his conical cap lopsided covering the back of his balding head and emphasizing the bony cheeks, broken incisor tooth contrasting the gold crown on his left premolar that came into view each time he opened his mouth to smile. As a habit, his smile was designed to bring the gold on show. He nurtured a fistful of beard stippled with badly dyed Henna. His muscles of shoulders and neck were robust and looked like the stump of a tree. He was dressed in a dark brown robe complemented with a luxurious cashmere shawl. The sparkling heavy gold chain around his neck was swinging to keep it the focal point. Altogether his looks that displayed his riches showed his position in the community. He also

made an involuntary display of gold premolar for which he smiled when there was no apparent reason. He assumed airs of importance at all times with a proud demeanor to show the servants in attendance his authority.

As a part of hospitality, he dispatched the servants to fetch the remains of calf killed that day from the makeshift village butchers. Meat is a luxury for people. If they are lucky a young bull may trip over and break his leg. They all pay the owner and divide portions. They wait for one more animal to have an accident. It is promptly butchered Halal and sold as meat. Mr. Joo is privileged to be the first one to be offered the best cut of the meat. The owner of the animal is paid. Chicken is domestic and lamb is sold in towns.

After a curried beef meal with hot chilies and rice and a cup of green tea to finish, it seemed I now had to reward my host and become an audience for his sermons. He started the conversation with the likely hazards of my expedition in the morning. He gave an account of the serpentine road over the mountains and watched to notice how fearful I looked. He settled on the most dreaded hazard of the avalanches during the early springtime. He began in a cool manner and a contrived deep voice:

'A bird's dropping can make an avalanche. It starts like a tiny snowball that gathers snow as it rolls down and amidst a loud roaring noise creates a mountain on wheels speeding like a thunder. Every object in its way is swallowed up. A remarkable story of a little girl

buried under snow is still fresh in the minds of the residents in this village'.

It was getting late and I wanted an early night but Joo was keen to continue his speech. After all, I was a novice in mountaineering and needed all the education I could be given. I had no choice but to listen if not for being a non-paying guest, I had to put up with the purgatory of listening to his tales. He said the story of the little girl buried under avalanche was remarkable and deserved to be related to me. He said 'The little girl was called Simi and her story of adventure is the favorite true story and repeated so often that it is on every bodies' lips and related without effort'.

Chapter 5

SIMI SAGA

Mr. Joo began his story to entertain me and prepared himself by taking a long drag at the Hubble Bubble. His lungs were full of smoke that was alarming. I watched his mouth, waiting for him to exhale smoke or would he otherwise explode. Finally, he exhaled to my great relief and started to speak.

‘The tale of the little girl Simi two years on still causes a stir in all Bandipore’. Joo was stirring his body, trying to get himself comfortable on the mattress he sat on.

‘Awan’s family is Gujjars’ who are always on the move like the gypsies except that their only luggage is sheep and a dog. Their 9-year-old Simi is a part of this happy nomad family.

‘One fateful day in early March two years back Awan, his wife Zuhra and Simi were back from their travels in the mountains. The newborn lamb was perched on Awan’s shoulders. After a grueling day walking, they were tempted to camp for the night in a wooden shack. This desolate wooden structure was a common facility for all travelers. This place is situated on our side of the mountains overlooking the ravine and seemed buttressed by an offshoot of the Razdhani Mountain range. The sun was shining, and the snow had started to soften. It was a mass of absolute desolation and an aura of demigods playing.

Awan's wife Zuhra made tea from a lump of snow and a meal from roasted chickpeas and cane sugar she carried. The baby lamb had enjoyed the ride on Awan's shoulders. The warm air was refreshing and lured the family to spend the fateful night in the hut. Sleeping sound through the night they were woken up next morning on Friday late February 1956 with a deafening sound like an earthquake that shook the hut. They knew it was the ominous warning sound of an avalanche'.

Joo paused for a drag. I was transfixed by the story with trepidation, in the knowledge that he was talking about the territory I was about to be embarking on my trek to Gurez. Joo knew I was listening and continued.

'It was an avalanche. Awan and his wife bolted out of the hut, clutching the baby goat. They screamed in a frenzy knowing well no human being could have heard them. They ran for their lives as fast as the storming snowdrift that precedes avalanches would let them. Simi the nine-year-old was toughened little girl and walked with her parents for as long as she could. She ran in pursuit close to Awan stepping in the footmarks left by her father in deep soft snow. The advancing edge of the avalanche is snow dust covering landmarks of the path. They were all fighting their way through this mist of snow covering their eyes.

In a few seconds, there was a thick blanket of snow storm and the family lost sight of each other. Awan

and his wife just managed to reach the stream at the bottom of the mountain. Both in a combined voice, shouted for Simi. The only sound they heard in response was loud howling from cascading avalanche. The Awans were stuck in knee-deep snow and going back and looking for Simi anywhere would be their own death and impossible even if they tried. They cried and shouted but to no avail’.

Joo took a break and puffed out whorls of smoke after another long drag continued the narrative.

‘There was eerie stillness after the avalanche had stopped its descent only marked by an occasional ball of snow rolling down to melt away in the running water of the stream. As a natural instinct, the couple with the goat dragged themselves towards the nearest place of safety sheltered under a rock’.

‘Bandipore that offered hope for help was seven miles away. Every other little hamlet was like a ghost town and abandoned.’

‘What happened to the little girl?’ I barged in impatiently

‘They lost her’ was his brusque reply. ‘Crying and veiling they reached Bandipore’

‘And cried for help when they reached here’

‘It was an early morning of Saturday, and young people of this village gathered and set off to the mountains. It was still crack of dawn, and without wasting time, the

village party of ten strong men started with shovels and digging implements on their shoulders. The experts in the party decided to find the hut first, the most likely place she would run for facing the onslaught of the falling snow. Awan lead the party to where he remembered the hut was buried, and he lost contact with Simi. He also remembered there was by a stroke of chance a wilted fir tree that stood beside the hut where they last saw Simi. Awan guided them to the tree that was only just visible. This was the only navigational signpost that pointed to a hundred yards of the hut. It was but natural the distraught father started shouting 'Simi' at the top of his voice. The call had vigor and pain in its pitch. He was crying.

His sound reverberated in a series of echoes by the overhanging mountains. New mountains of snow were in view that did not exist before the avalanche. He was restrained by the party to stop shouting and not provoke the devil and stir one more avalanche. They would all be buried along with Simi where ever she was. This time of the year, snow anchored by its weight begins to thaw as the permafrost gets warmer'.

I nodded in agreement as if I already knew. That was not true. I turned my full attention to Joo, who was clutching the long pipe of the Hubble Bubble.

'It is important for travelers to learn the lesson to be aware of the danger and not be lured by the warm sun and double guess the onslaught of an avalanche'.

I thought this was a message directed at me and felt humbled. He ignored my reaction and carried on with the sermon to connect with the story.

'The might of the Mountains in an implicit manner imposed a caution on travelers not to stir or even shout when the spring air is wafted in from the planes. The glimmer of hope in this situation was the recent avalanche in this place that a repeat deluge was unlikely'.

Mr. Joo paused for a moment when a servant showed up. He was given orders to fetch live coal for the Hubble Bubble and salt tea. Now the price I had to pay for listening to his tale was higher because the bubbly noise and inhaling passive smoking was annoying me. But after all the purgatory my host put me through it was worth it because it ended in the most fascinating story ever. I loved the salt tea and sipped noisily to drown out the noise from the Hubble bubble machine while he continued.

'After a full day's journey, the search party arrived at the location of the hut. It was sheer luck that the tops of the broken branches of the buried tree were still visible. Awan guided the party to the tree outside the abandoned wooden hut, the landmark they approached. The tree was crucial. They shoveled tons of snow but had to abandon when a westerly wind started snowdrift that covered over whatever depth they had gained. They had shoveled a trench long enough to house an army, but there was no sign of the hut'.

Gosh, I thought it is getting worse. I was now getting engrossed and pinned my ears in his direction. He said.

‘That evening all men and Awan returned with no sign of the girl. A third party of twenty left for the mission next day now expecting to retrieve the body of Simi for a proper burial because it was the third day and even a slim hope of Simi being alive seemed remote. The villagers contributed money towards buying firewood that would be required as part of the custom to warm water and bathe the dead body before burial’.

I was getting a little uneasy to know the outcome. It must have been apparent with my demeanor. Joo hurried the story.

‘The only clue available in the vast expanse of the avalanche was the sighting of striven pieces of wood from the roof of the hut that laid the trail. It was dusk now but still light from snow on which the light of the full moon was shining. The reflected bright light was heartening to these young men digging to depths of snow. Now and then Awan burst into screams calling Simi that resulted in a series of echoes tearing across the mountains and reverberating through the canyons as if the spirits of this wilderness had joined in his appeal to find her. My son Ahmad was the leader of the search party, and he warned Awan again to shut up; otherwise vibrations from the shouts will start one more avalanche and then there will be no one left in the village to dig their bodies’.

Joo paused and looked me in the eyes as if to see if I was impressed with his account of the heroic deeds of his son and his bravery and leadership. Instead, I made an impromptu tactless remark that was not received well. I said:

‘Surely the local army could have helped. They have plenty of equipment’

As if to ridicule me for the remark, he wiped his nose on the back of his long shirt sleeve as he replied:

‘Army has enough on their plate to contain political uprising, and we are the targets of their fury not rescue! It is a tall order to expect help from them’.

The story was getting more intriguing as he continued, and the smoke from the *Shisha* had subsided, encouraging me to pay more attention. He offered the *Shisha* to me for a drag when the cinders in the tobacco receptacle had turned white with ash. I refused the offer and instantly grabbed the opportunity to impose some authority in this conversation. Clearing my throat, I said:

“No thank you I don’t smoke and you must also kick the habit. You perhaps do not know that it is not so much about how smoking kills people with lung cancer as it is the agony smokers endure when they are not able to breathe with wheezing and persistent coughing. Besides other evils smoking also rots your teeth’.

Joo was aghast with my outburst but forgave me instantly realizing that I was after all a doctor and a guest in his house, even though he received no

payment for the hospitality. He also realized I said it in good faith and for the good of his health. He, therefore, ignored my sermon but impatiently continued to spin the Simi yarn: Simi was the little girl's name buried under the avalanche. He said:



Grotto seen buried under an avalanche. A similar abode where Simi lived'

'The rescue party found pieces of wood striven from the remains of the roof of the hut and followed the trail until they uncovered the wooden frame of the door covering a grotto in which they discovered shining Simi's toes, hardly visible because they were white as snow that buried them. In a flurry of excitement, everyone used bare hands to move the snow that covered the body. It seemed the snow got softer as they approached her body as if they were removing a blanket from her bed. Awan more frantic than others lifted her out of a cavity shaped to her size curled up and faced down, and even before cleaning the hard flakes of ice on her face, he hugged her stiff body close. She was frozen and dead. The body was stiff and iced over like an icicle. Tears from Awan and the warm

sweat of his body started to thaw the ice on her body. The party arrived home late that night, stopping on their way at the local hospital'.

He paused in reflection. I thought that was enough bedtime storytelling and made gestures of falling asleep. Far from a conclusion of the story Joo leaned forward to continue his narrative with more vigor.

'The mother Zuhra and her relatives made a scene outside the room where Simi was now laid on an operating table. The doctor succeeded in straightening her body'.

Straitening word used prompted Joo to fix his eyes on me. I said assertively:

'Yes; if the dead body remains laid up for a day you need to physically straighten knees and elbows if rigor mortis has set in'.

I waited for more of the story to come impatiently. I stretched my legs to relax, keeping my toes covered with the blanket and waited for a retort. Instead, he smiled and went on to reveal the miracle:

'Awan had already transferred warmth from his body and hot water bottles were placed under the blanket covering Simi. The entire staff in the hospital gathered in the room as the doctor sensed a flicker of movement in the dead girl's eyelashes and a faint heartbeat audible through the stethoscope. Immediately she was started on a drip of warm dextrose saline and in an hour or so she opened her eyes'.

I was wide awake and pinned my ears to listen. My toes were now exposed as I changed my posture. Joo went on.

'Zuhra fainted and collapsed on the floor, and the commotion filled the village. Ascetics descended on the hospital and pronounced Simi was dead, but her spirit had returned from Heaven and was making an appearance. People urged the doctors to lay off intervention and let nature take its course. Warming and saline infusion had already taken effect, and it was announced that Simi was thawed back to life. Her pale white body had started to change color as Awan hugged her close. For everyone, it was a Eureka moment because they had made preparations for a burial for little Simi. Dry timber logs were brought in to prepare hot water for her last bath before burial, and now that same timber was used to prepare a feast for for celebrations. Crowds of people flocked to have a look at her. She looked like an angel, extremely pale with her limp body. People believed she had returned from Heaven'

I was amazed and excited because I had read about a similar occurrence of life under hypothermia. In open-heart surgery, the ice keeps the brain living while the heart is operated. Brain survives for 8 minutes when the heart stops, and the brain has no blood and oxygen. Joo almost woke me up from a reverie and resumed the story.

'Fully recovered in the hospital, Simi narrated an awe-inspiring description of what became a stunning folklore on everyone's lips ever since.'

I was now getting very much engrossed and wanted to contribute my bit to the story: I said:

'There are reported cases in the literature about survivors of people buried for many days under the snow'. In a quick analysis, I built a scenario to explain the event in simple words. I interceded.

'In order to reconstruct the sequence of events in the story like the Simi's ordeal, it can be said that the child was frightened and heaving with strong breathing. Her warm breath thawed the snow and created a bubble around her face. She would become unconscious with the impact on her head and gradually become iced up. Her brain still functional with the limited oxygen trapped in the bubble she had created with her breath and with no demand from her inactive body for the vital gas oxygen she was moribund but her brain retains life in the frozen state. It is the brain that is the last vital organ to cease function before death. Once revived, the brain starts to function, the rest of the organs follow.'

I was glad for the medical jargon that may or may not has made an impression on Joo and two other elderly listeners who had joined us. Joo paused to listen without signs of taking in my heuristic narrative. He continued the attention-grabbing account that created a recess in my mind at an emotional level that never left me in all my life to this day as I write. He resumed his narrative:

'It was her story that caused an eerie stir in the community. It was an explicit account of her ordeal

buried under the snow. Her own words have been repeated so many times that everyone remembers details by heart. A day after coming back to life, her words spoken in soft tone reverberates on everybody's lips.' Like a written script, he narrated what she had said. In her words:-

'I remember I was thrown to the ground swept by a strong shove of snowdrift and something hit me hard on my head. It was excruciating. I was knocked down and everything went blank. I opened my mouth to cry, but snow gagged me. After that, I felt no pain but as I tried to open my eyes the stillness in the shinning white cave frightened me, and I lapsed into a dream. It seems now that I was not afraid anymore and I could feel myself floating in the air and saw my own body curled up as if I was looking down on it from above like in a mirror. As I saw myself, only half my face was visible, and my hair was piled up in tangles down to my knees. It looked like I was asleep and this gigantic figure with a long white robe stood beside me and spoke some words I could not fathom but they were soft words in a deep voice spoken in our tongue.'

Joo paused to recall what she said. Simi realized that her story was causing a tremendous stir and seemed overwhelmed. It was after persuasion by the local priest that she continued her story, reflecting to recall with great effort.

'The figure looked like a man and wore clothes that were shining a very bright light that dazzled me, and I made an effort to cover my eyes but could not do so because my arms were hefty. I recall getting a snippet

of dreaming and waking up sometimes looking at myself and fainted sleeping in between. The mystery man went away and soon came back. I spent a lifetime looking at his face. Once he cleared the snow from my face and mouth and uttered softly the same hardly audible words. I only recall that those words made me happy, and I felt safe. He was gone like a figure that melted away. Even when no one was visible with me, I always knew there was someone there very near me. It seemed I spent many years in a world so different from here because when I was there, I did not remember anything from where I came from. When my Papa called my name at the doctors, it was like waking from sleep. I remember everything now. I thought; at first I was not here at home. Now I remember what I said about the man who came to see me in the mountains. It hurts my head every time I talk about him'.

She cried. The family is very happy that she is back with them and in the last years, she has grown up as a normal girl and remembers little sketches of her experience, thanks to prayers and spiritual help.

The doctor may have helped her when she was at the thin edge of her life, but from then on she was under the care of the village priest who on a regular basis debriefed her about her spiritual sojourn and gave her portions of holy water Zum Zum from Mecca to drink specially obtained for her from recent Hajj pilgrims of Bandipore. His story convicted people that the mountains of Gurez are inhabited by demigods. The white robed man in the cave where Simi lived was a demigod.

Chapter 6

THE TREK

Farewell to Joo

Small hours of the morning Joo was up and ready after his morning rituals of prayers. All his staff, men and women were standing to receive orders if required. I had to trim down my luggage that could be carried by my guide in addition to his postbag that fortunately was small. I was given a bamboo stick and a bag on my shoulders. Joo offered to send my baggage when the road opens. We set off from Joo's house and having received a lesson on navigation and blessings from my host, it seemed like we are heading for the base camp of Mount Everest expedition. My nerves were visibly rattling with a mixture of excitement and trepidation.

I was now introduced to the most important man of my life, Abdul Gaffoor, the postman of Gurez. This little man was a prodigy known all over as mobile post office, carting government orders, letters and parcels and crossing the most terrain on foot twice a week and escorting travelers. He proved to be a tough man with nerves of steel. He was crucial for me as we will find.

Having bid farewell to all domestics and a big crowd of neighbors gathered to witness the occasion we set off from Joo house on this beautiful Bandipore morning. Acting on advice that facing westward into the mountains, you must make an early start and recite a verse reserved for this occasion. Those days there was

nothing like weather forecast available. Local experts look at the skies, the direction of the movement of clouds and pine cones to give you a forecast. If the pine cones are closed, it is going to be wet and cold. An open cone predicts a dry day. Abdul was reassured the skies will stay clear. This time as you will find out they were wrong. It snowed heavily as we approached the summit.

Those days there was no public transport to reach Gurez. The serpentine road that takes you to the summit of the 12,000ft high lofty Razdhani Mountain is the long and arduous trek. In the long-drawn months of winter, the mountains are laden with snow. The army has facilities to link up with the vast encampment of forces stationed deep inside the valleys of Gurez and Tulail. They are dotted over the border by a rutted road, crossing the 11,672-ft Razdhani Pass.

Here I am setting off to a great epoch of my life creating indelible marks of epiphany. Why am I doing this? Did I spend all those years of education training to start (on starting) my life to live in the mountains? Somehow I felt I needed some assurance. We walked with a steady pace, gathering momentum as we approached the mountains. It was time I engaged the services of my escort and treat him as equal and converse. I said; 'Abdul you work very hard to earn a living. Have you got a large family at home?'

Abdul amused and surprised at my interest in his private life, smiled and said:

'I am not getting the reward for the work I put in. I have to feed two children and an ailing mother. I need to earn extra money and work as an occasional guide like I do now.'

I could understand his hint for a tip from me on top of the agreed sum. I was willing to pay, and I did.

We were now approaching the foothills anticipating an aura of trepidation as the mountains came into view. It may have been routine for Abdul, but the cool breeze alerted me to venture the journey as part of share adventurism. Beyond the village of Bandipore, all mountains are under the control of the Indian army to a point where line of control spans across the mountain range. It is like a rugged border, dividing Kashmir and Pakistan.

The trek on foot to Gurez was a lifetime experience that has exciting as well as mortifying as we shall find out. The only way in and out of Gurez during wintertime is by means of a helicopter, which was exclusive to army use.

I reassured myself that Abdul was the best guide in Bandipore. He was also the foot postman, the only means of postal services available to the region. His postbag was not enormous but contained all means of written information between residents and government offices from inside Gurez to the rest of the world. It

gave me added confidence that Abdul is the sole agent who scales mountains on a regular basis.

Abdul was a puny man in his forties wearing a demeanor of a ruddy face hidden behind deep weathered wrinkles and disorderly beard that barely spared his eyes. His personality was not striking the least to look at him, albeit when he spoke his deep voice was reassuring. He spoke of his experience of surviving the journey for many years' regular trips over the mountains and saving numerous lives.

On our first stop, I recall I met captain Aziz who was coming from the opposite direction. After usual greetings and while I notice his sun burnt face and the glistening white teeth he grinned in amazement. He was amazed, never expecting to meet me at this point of wilderness. We knew each other at school.

'Hi! Doc! What a surprise? After all those years back in school, we now meet in these foothills.' After a warm hug I responded;

'Hi! Aziz, School days indeed! We have now forgotten. You look extremely robust in your captain's uniform.'

Having measuring up each other about the progress in body and rank, we talked about the merits of our Mission school. It was the training we received at school that prepared us to face life-threatening situations. He said:

'We have schooling experience in mountaineering.'

He was an army captain and had more people as an escort with him. He cautioned me as we parted.

'The weather is not promising, but the golden rule is to forge ahead and never dither and look back.'

'Thank you, Aziz'. I said.

Our mutual experience of the grilling into physical adventure we were subjected to was built into our character. This particular school was run by Tyndale Eric Biscoe, a missionary from Ireland. The activities of the school included mountain climbing, and all students were divided into four groups, each named after the mountain peaks they climbed. The four houses were Haramukh, Kolohai, Mahadev and Tratakoti. Aziz was not in my house but remembered that Haramukh in which I was a popular athlete won most events and races in aquatic sport. Considering that background, Abdul was no match to me and yet he was the skipper of our expedition.

As we were on the uphill trek, my eyes were fixed on the gigantic shelf of the mountain in front. I felt a sense of aura of fear as I was convinced that some kind of mystery surrounds these mountains. I remember words from Joo. Mountains seemed to have a discernable personality. Abdul urged me on. We continued a steady pace and the road was clearly visible. After ten more miles or so the mountain air was closing in on me as different. I was reminding myself that I am going through a territory possibly possessed. It was getting misty with compromised

visibility. Abdul never stopped talking and telling tales on the way up the mountain. The stories were scary but as I will reveal later formed a crucial part of his strategy to keep me alerted in our expedition.

'I will not scare you sir! Now that we are in the middle of our journey, you must prepare yourself to be enduring very harsh snowdrifts ahead. The skies are looking angry. It will be a trying climb and what I dread most is the road that gets completely covered over with snow. We have to keep walking without hesitation, one step at a time and not waver.'

I was making mental notes and wondering what would happen if I swooned under the pressure of fear. One message was clear by Abdul and he said:

'Sir press on with a steady and consistent pace and do not look back to see what you have passed'

I remembered him saying words that sounded like the French version of '*Festina Lente*' translating as 'Make haste slowly' meaning take purposeful steps forward.

Abdul was now the captain, and I had to listen. I said:

'How will I find the road, if it is covered over with snow?'

'You can't. Exactly what I was going to say' replied Abdul.

'You must remember to focus on where my foot mark shows. As soon as I lift my foot to take the next step, you must get your foot in the mark quickly before it disappears with snowdrift. I know where the road is even though it is completely snowed over because by

experience and knowledge, I use guidance from landmarks in the distance.'

I felt alarmed at this hazard and wanted to know more. I asked

'What happens if I miss the footprint you leave?'

'Your foot may find deep snow. That is why I keep close and help you coming back on track. Your stick also helps to keep from sliding'. He replied

As we climbed further approaching the last lap to the summit, it was horrifying and getting worse as we heard the howling wind picking up in speed. A sudden flash seized me. Why did I have to take this job and face this perilous situation? It was too late to return back home and forget about the soft and comfy inviting bed that is still waiting. Not with study something inside me caused a stir as if it energized a hidden spirit within me. I must take the challenge. I have to brave it. Abdul knew how important it was to keep my faculties alerted. His advice was crucial.

'Your foot may go deep and you will lose balance because you will be supported on soft snow lopsided. Therefore you Keep yourself leaning towards the slope and dig the stick deep into the snow.'

This lesson was crucial for me later. He said;

'I may not be able to hear you if we are in the middle of a storm. There will be a howling sound that is deafening.'

I sensed he was conscious of having said too much. He made amends and said:

'I am only warning you if the worst of the whether hits the mountain'.

We are now walking up the first few miles of an easy climb and approaching the top end of the 12,000 feet mighty Razdhani Mountain. Suddenly a dark halo descended from the Heavens. The realization was alive in me that our lives were imperiled and we looked at each other seeking assurance of each other's company. A horrid thought seized my mind about this little man making this journey alone as his job of a postman could be blown by the gust of snow and blown away without any witness in sight. There would be no one to tell the world the story of his last moments alive. Stormy Weather is a formidable adversary for the travelers. In order to beat the storm and to walk the forty-mile trek, you rely on your physical brute strength, dogged concentration and God's help. There are no rescue teams that will answer your SOS (Save Our Soul) call.

The snowdrifts started to waft in our direction. We are still close to each other and are able to communicate. He said:

'Please keep your cool. The storm can be so vicious, intractable and fearsome that just to give you an idea, a dog was known to have been blown off to another peak called Haramukh a hundred miles away and found alive on that peak'.

Abdul suddenly turned round to alert me, as if he understood that my mind had drifted.

'Please keep vigilant at all times. The climb will get harder and you need to focus on every step you take and the direction you follow on the way.'

'I am sorry. I was not expecting this. We cannot turn back now.' He said

I was getting concerned now. I can feel something at the pit of my stomach. I blurted out peevishly.

'I can understand Abdul'. I replied aloud to reassure him.

After the five miles we had done I said;

'I am not a bit tired Abdul' Aware about the signs of an impending storm and trying to lessen the air of doom.

After a while, he turned his face up and said 'Do you see that blanket of black cloud coming towards us. I pray it changes direction and does not bring any problems for us?'

There was an eerie silence and as if the black cloud could hear me screaming, I felt it coming swooping on us and taking away the bright rays of the sun.

'I did not want to say it but I think we will soon be facing rain that may turn to snow' warned Abdul.

We are only about five miles to the summit.

'This time of the year is late for snow' I said consoling myself than making a judgment.

Abdul replied:

'These mountains can get wild any time and they seem to invite snowstorms to unleash wrath as if to defy

violation of their space by humans like us. Abdul was muttering words that I could just decipher. I recall the assertion that these mountains are living like humans. The omen is what I am about to face. There is a dark drift of chilly wind touching my face.

Epiphany: Life or death

The initial ten miles walking was grueling for me because this was a new experience for me, but we managed to climb. As we approached the summit, the worst was to come. In seconds the footprints were covered by snow and all my mental faculties were on alert with a heavy burden on the pit of my stomach. My walk was now getting slower. I turned toward Abdul. He expected me to ask him about the imminent danger. He said:

'Please do not forget to get your foot in the footprint I leave immediately because the snowdrift will cover the mark. It may turn into a storm and then I could not even see Abdul in front of me let alone the footmarks he left for me to follow.

The storm did arrive. It turned frightfully dark over crystals of white snow striking my face. A moment of sudden epiphany gripped my mind. An aura was felt presaging disaster and appeared as hubris. The experience of life dawned upon me taking me through a deep philosophical journey of the mind. Was death imminent? As I looked all around me, I could barely

see Abdul as if he was far away when in reality he was stood only a few steps away.

In my state of fear, I realized for the first time that a frontier between two civilizations, ephemeral and ethereal was not only imagination. Abdul reached out and beckoned me on; pointing to the mark he made to place my foot. I walked on the tenuous thread of my nerves, focused on the foot marks left by Abdul. I swayed to keep my balance with utmost help from the strong stick I had that I dug deep inside the snow and used as a lever to plough on. Any sign of a grotto I step in I would invite disaster. The strong wind picked up walloping my face with snow dust. I was trudging along one footstep a time.

We were walking on this steep slope with the mountain on the right and deep bottomless canyon on my left. I did not dare look on my left for fear I might faint. I would lose balance with my mind reeling and find myself tumbling down. I had the help of my stick that became a life saving prop. Abdul was ten steps ahead and watched me, urging me with his right hand. It was sheer providence that I kept alert through the last lap of this trek. If my stick broke, or the snowdrift was too strong and overwhelmed my strength, I would have been thrown over down the steep slope and disappeared in the precipice as a ball of snow or as a nucleus of an avalanche. My body rolled into a ball would be a weight surplus to requirement for spawning an avalanche. The danger was real, and I could be

propelled by the wind down the ravine and end up as its nucleus in the middle. My body would have thawed out in summertime.

There were multiple risk factors at play and the odds were against me. If my step missed the path as I explained, I could sink inside soft snow and my guide may not be able to pull me out. In this short spell, I had a very long drawn agonizing journey with hard lumps of snowflakes striking and obscuring my sunglasses and my wide-open eyes. The storyline of my journey was unraveling with my heart beating so I could hear the sounds distinctly, conscious that it was a struggle for survival.

As we climbed further, Abdul waved and said something with his closed mouth. He frequently turned round to ebb me on but looked a ghastly sight with a smidgen of his nose and eyes visible through lumps of snow heaped on his face and head. Nevertheless, when he turned around, he was my best hope of survival and he stopped frequently to reassure me with the gesture of his finger and pointed to the footmarks he left for me to concentrate on.

Suddenly it seemed I was no longer in control of myself and my actions seem to be guided instinctively. For moments I did not count I wandered into the unknown and a big hand seemed to settle on my right shoulder with a sensation of being lifted and carried. I felt an eerie epiphany between life and death. I have

no memory about how long this insentient spell had lasted when I seemed to have woken up with a painful slap that landed on my face. I instantly saw it was Abdul my guide who confronted me and stood claiming to own responsibility for the assault. I, later on, revamped my memory on the subject and more understanding came to light. I was suffering mild symptoms of Altitude Sickness now that I had climbed to about 12,000 ft above sea level.

Altitude sickness

My ambient barometric pressure and oxygen levels were low and caused confusion and dizziness. Abdul will not be affected because he is acclimatized having done this stretch many times and living at higher levels. It is a good job we made it to the top quickly; otherwise I had to look for lower altitude to recover. A serious complication can occur if lower pressure outside body brings fluid out from blood vessels to alveoli or lungs causing shortness of breath or worse still into brain cells (Cerebral edema). Some hikers may compensate low oxygen in the air by breathing fast and end up hyperventilating and getting rid of CO₂ that may result in alkalosis and constriction of cerebral arteries further deteriorating cerebral function and consciousness. It is important to have this knowledge of altitude rather than depend on a slap on your face.

In my case, my overnight stay in Bandipore was a great help because from my home I had already gained about 2000 feet height. It was a gradual ascent over

Razdhani Mountain that also helped. If ever I end up with sickness, I have to go downhill to lower altitudes quickly and use remedies like ginger or medications like Diamox etc. Recovery is quick.

In a bizarre moment, I reacted as if the slap was deserved and vaguely knew why he had done it. Fortunately, we had come through the worst part of the trek and now stood on the plateau of the peak. I did think that there will be an end to this journey, and we will emerge as heroes at the other end. That is why when we did reach the top it was a great achievement. My life was saved by Abdul when he landed the hard slap of my face.

'We are at the summit. Wake up and see what paradise looks like?' Abdul had to shout for me to hear.

I was alive!

I was overwhelmed at the spectacle I saw. The huge expanse of bright, unblemished snowfield was in sight with endless peaks stretching to infinity and limited only by indeterminate horizon into which the mountains melted away in hazy skies. It was so beautiful that I dare not keep my eyes open to absorb the spectacle. It was also scary. Am I alive?

I took an intense breath. A mark of great relief we stood on this flat plateau of firm snow and rock-like structure was in sight. We settled on its inviting surface. The fierce sun rays shining on my face were

smarting while I took my sunglasses off. I noticed looking at my guide Abdul how gleaming set of white teeth stood out from amidst his beard as he spoke. He was unloading the luggage and postbag, apologizing as he did so. He said briefly:

‘The slap’

‘I am sorry.’

Abdul was apologizing for the punch he landed on my face. In normal circumstances this assault was unthinkable. I would have responded differently with reproach and violence. Inwardly my body accepted it as the recipient of this assault at the time was beyond my reckoning. I was not only immersed in a stupor the assault on me passed un-noticed. Life-threatening blast of snowdrift left me as it hit my face, but strangely I forgot it happened. Abdul jogged my memory, and I responded.

‘Whatever came over you to raise your hand on my face, which I thought at first as help to clear snow deposited that blocked my vision’. I made up the story.

Having accepted the reproach, Abdul was encouraged to show off his wisdom and experience of mountains. He said.

‘I saw the signs of wavering mind in you because you were rambling something about a school and also called out some names that did not make sense to me. I hit you on your face to bring you back from the trance. I apologize again, but it had to be done’.

It is only some minutes back, but it seems as if the mist from my memory is lifting and I see the slapping incident clearer. I am mulling over what crossed my mind as I stepped into the last few strides to the top. You need austere self-control and all senses at your command. I resigned myself to let nature take the command to control my journey. The worst of the situation was the risk of losing me to the powers of demigods. The journey takes your strength and fortitude. It was an eye-opener as I stepped from wilderness to the seascape in the skies of Gurez.



The Gurez valley, viewed from the top of Razdhani Pass, Located high in the Himalayas about 2,400 meters above sea level. We are in a seascape well above the clouds.

I could not overcome the excitement of living through the ordeal of the last mile and a half and the scenery we are a part of in this huge expanse of endless white carpet and peaks guarding its frontiers. The huge rock was comfortable and afforded a place to settle for a break. I was spirited to make conversation. I encouraged Abdul to chat.

This was time to be treated to a cup of warm tea from the flask. It revived us both.

He grinned to part his livid lips covered with snow. Looking at his physique, I was intrigued at his potential strength. How long is he going to last making these trips? He said:

'No sir they all say I am tough old boots! My body and senses work together, and so far, thank God have not failed me. On these mountains, I would not lose my composure, the demigods know me.'

I laughed and retorted

'You can also be possessed Abdul'

He turned away to face the mountain as he replied.

'True so I can, but these icons of environment know me and have absorbed me as their part. I foresee the unseen. For newcomers, it is common for people to lose senses on these mountains and wander off until they get lost in the wilderness of the mountains. Every year invariably these mountains are known to consume some people'.

He was now wiping the deposits of icy snow from his face and continued:

'There are stories of travelers entering the devils' trap as we know it. The locals say that these mountains are inhabited by spirits they call demigods who do not like stranger trespassers. There is no trace of remains of the disappeared found'.

Abdul looked around making an arc with his eyes saying:

'We are regular travelers, and we know the signs and are warned. The demigods seem to have accepted our presence in these parts and know us.'

Abdul seemed to be animated with my rapt attention as we started to walk. He related an episode that had a reference to medical department. He said.

'I escorted your predecessor doctor three years back who lost control of his senses and wandered off. I lost sight of him as the storm turned into a dark blanket. Fortunately I knew where the drift was going and tracked him down. I grabbed hold of the scarf he was wearing and yanked him to safety. He was in stupor and started calling out to his wife by name. I heard him ask for a cup of tea from the samovar. I applied the same treatment and slapped him that revived him back to his senses.'

This interlude was new life for me. As we started to make progress, I felt energized; an unexplained innate joy-filled inside my soul. I felt great and literally the top of the world. The adage 'from adversity you come out stronger' comes true. The sun was shining naked UV rays. Clouds disappeared and it was getting warmer, but I kept my face covered. I was aware that in mountain tops the rarefied air and pollution free ambiance provided zero protection from the ultraviolet rays. The naked sun seemed to be beating down on us ferociously. There were no sun-block creams those days in Kashmir.

Abdul was my escort, guide and porter. He was also the only postman for the whole region. He was the most seasoned traveler in all Gurez. He knew by person everyone that mattered because he was the post office and the postman delivering letters and money orders as a single man personally. He receives money and gifts. He did not show his age, and at possibly 40 and despite a worn-out weathered face, he looked a robust 30

Sledging on Chador

Having a challenging experience of rebirth on the summit of Razdhani we walked on unmarked territory lead by Abdul. The road going down was not visible so my guide navigated me in a direction towards the end of this plateau. We were approaching the cliff-hanger beyond which there was a steep drop into the ravine. I was stood still reeling under the view of the expanse of panorama that confronts me and the endless abyss. I exclaimed;

'Is this what Heaven looks like? Is this a preview? Where are we Abdul?

I got no answer and stayed close to Abdul. I asked again.

'Where is the road to climb down Abdul?'

A broad smile that I thought was uncalled for when I was so alarmed. He replied.

'Sir, the road is buried under snow and takes you a long way round. We save 10 miles stretch by sledging down. It is very easy and you will enjoy the ride. It is

easy and safe. Besides, I will be alongside you all the way down'.

I waited for him to explain. He said;

'Yes sir! You guessed it. I will lay my chador flat on the snow. You sit in the middle with legs splayed on either side and dig shoe heels in the snow to control the descent and direction. You hold fast bottom ends of chador and lift up yourself freewheeling down as I will demonstrate. In no time you will be flying down an exciting ride of your life.'

'You must be crazy Abdul.'

I had ambivalent feelings about this undertaking plan because notwithstanding the excitement I was also awe stricken about the prospect of a free drop to the endless depths of the unseen valley. I asked.

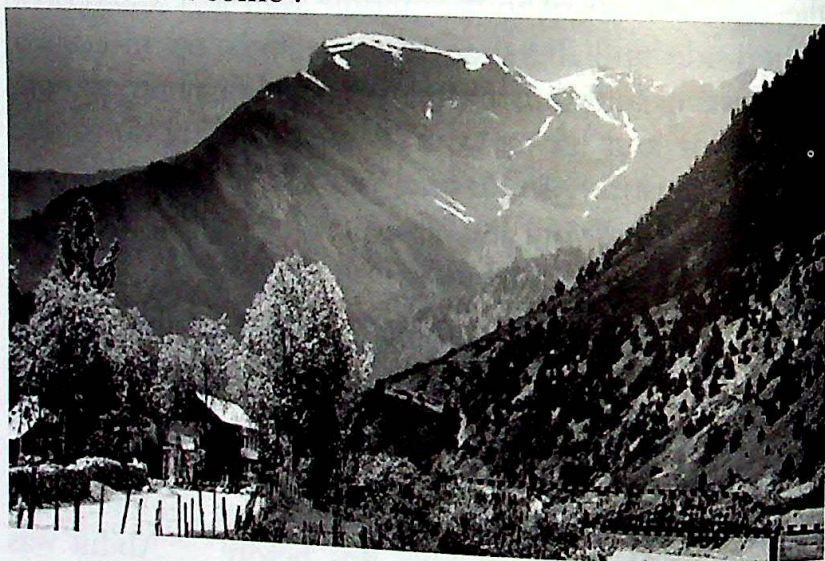
'Is there a chance of tumbling free in summersaults Abdul? I have never done this before' Abdul was sniggering now.

'On a chador, I mean; you fool. I have been on skies before' I retorted.

Abdul gave me a quick lesson in sledging down the slope. I waited on the threshold, terrified at the prospect of what looked like an unstoppable downward ride. There are miles and miles of this slope with no bottom in sight. It is like a blind jump into an abyss. I was nevertheless, thrilled with excitement. Abdul spread chador (blanket type) on the snow close to the cliff-hanger, made me sit on it and gave me the two lower ends of the chador to grab securely, straddling

my legs on either side of chador as he explained. I lifted my feet up and with the help of a push I found myself sliding down at speed to an exquisitely thrilling experience.

Gurez here I come !



Chapter 7

Gurez here I come!

I shouted at the top of my voice as loud as I could. 'Gurez here I come' and 'Beat the devils, here I come!' Sliding down with speed, the guide was by my side on his makeshift sledge. He kept muttering something as we descended that I took no notice of but just drifted in the free air thrill holding fast the ends of the chador. So suffused was I in the excitement, nothing else in the world mattered. It must have been a long way down because as we touched down the bottom it was a completely different country we landed in as if we had flown in from almost another world in the flight on Chador ride. It was very enjoyable. On either side, as we rolled down the slope, we were surrounded with a white carpet of snow with sunshine shimmering from its surface. Looking at this expanse, there were vastness surroundings of nothingness. We reached the bottom on the bank of a stream, the sound of which was deafening with its fast-flowing water.

Hiding shy behind the rocks to add more excitement were two otters with large eyes and slinking bodies covered by light brown fur. They quickly disappeared out of view. I knew about otters with my family furrier background.



Otter in Gurez stream ⁹

Carnivorous, otters live on fish and spend time inside and outside water. Their skin made beautiful fur coats, exquisitely soft like velvet especially when the long hair is plucked. My search for some more otters in this shimmering white water of the stream ended in vain. The pair were possibly watching me from behind a rock but did not show themselves up may be shy or scared. I felt their presence near me. They possibly knew that I belonged to a family of furriers, so kept away, just so I don't turn them into a fur coat. Humor apart I was very fascinated. I would have loved to just look at their eyes and stroke them lovingly if they gave me a chance. I remember the pair to this day.

We have reached the main road now reduced to a path with snow but an easy walk down the slope. We walked jauntily at an easy pace the rest of the way to 'Kanzalwan' the next stop before Gurez.

⁹ www.Walkthroughindia.com

It is amazing where my strength came from. I was almost rejuvenated after the downhill ride on makeshift chador sledge and walked jauntily along the narrow path by the side of the stream. Walking downhill it felt like freewheeling on smooth wheels with gentle wind at my back urging me on. The downward journey was helping remains of my fuzzy feeling because I was rapidly losing altitude. Relief of Sickness with a sudden drop to 7000 ft. altitude and abundance of the purest ozone filled fresh air was also invigorating. The stream that accompanied us was a stimulating company. I looked for my favorite pair of otters.

Abdul looked robust with his beard visible and face glowing. We exchange smiles like two great explorers who made it to their destination. I prompted him to speak and was glad to provide him a willing audience. His soft, deep voice kept my rapt attention. He had one more experience of saving a life from the jaws of a demigod. He said:

'This is going back to when I started this job of a guide. The middle aged government employee looked tired and pale. I suddenly lost him in a snow drift. Fortunately, I knew which way the mountains tempt the travelers. I ran and found his slouch hat first then the rest of him from out of a snow grotto he had made by falling in. I grabbed him finding him still alive and gave him a wallop on his face.'

Abdul stopped for a moment looking at my expression. He knew I was left agog wondering if that

treatment was necessary to revive from stupor. Abdul noticed my flinching and slowed down his narrative. He said.

'The man had been facing Haramukh Mountain known for its demigods tempting travelers and in minutes he could have been lost from view and disappear.' I quickly retorted;

'Why did you not warn him in time?'

'I did. He was driven in that direction by more powerful'.

I had to believe him.

We increased our pace.

It was a Eureka moment for me to have scaled the most difficult part of the long trek and experience exquisite wilderness and heights of adventure. I was revived beyond expectation. It was a downhill brisk walk of five miles before any sign of habitation came into view. Far in the distance, a deserted solitary half-finished wooden hut was visible and we headed for that. Abdul sensed my alarm as we walked in absolute desolation and silence. It was also getting dark and if it were not the shining vastness of snow-clad expanse around us it would be pitch dark.

Halfway Sojourn

Abdul broke the silence. His voice was becoming starker, breaking the stillness as he made conversation. He said:

'Everyone in the village and the army camp that you can see at the top with dim lights retire inside about

this time. The local people mostly work for the army and live in the village you can glimpse from here. They also disappear to their homes.'

He pointed towards a cluster of houses covered over by snow looking like blobs of foam. There was no sign of life around us.

I was not sure if I was scared for the spooky environment or enjoying a sense of freedom into calm. I did look around feasting my eyes with nothing exalting I had seen before, but one hesitation to believe that we are safe. I said:

'Do you think the snow leopard a normal resident of these mountains would make an appearance now? We both could be a nice meal for him?'

'Ha-ha, yes, indeed, we could be a few morsels that last him a few days. Fortunately, the snow leopards live in higher mountains but the grizzly bears do make an appearance when there are crops like maize in summertime. The bears also like earthworms and for this delicacy these animals dig top layers of earth. We find large divots in open spaces. They may get humans if intercepted or challenged and cause havoc with them with their claws.'

I was bemused at the way this animal attacks. Why does he go for the face? We know the lions and leopards go for the throat of any prey. That way, they control both the artery and windpipe with instant results. This topic could be relevant in my work, and I was reminded about what challenges may be faced, as indeed came true as you will find in later pages.

The snow made its own light that was like the moon itself. The world had come to a stop and the stillness in desolation was scary. As Abdul said, people by now had retired to their homes and the main village Kanzalwan was a mile away. We looked for accommodation and settled for this deserted hut newly built and half-finished. Abdul made a bed for the night for me with some sheets of plywood. He contrived the makeshift bed made from the blanket he was using and the one I used to sledge down the precipice from the top, even though a little wet. It was a combination of relief that I was still alive and fatigue had set in from the very long journey. The thirty-mile trek over the tallest peaks in the range was enough to take its toll on me. It was approaching dusk, but the place was lit with the light from the moon reflecting brightness off the snow that covered everything except the roof of the hut we settled in for the night. There was hush and tranquility all around us and we tried not to make a noise and break the spell of the night. As a frightening thought animals from the adjacent jungle now far away may come snooping in for a meal. May we tempt fate and the dreaded abominable snowman appeared and knocked. I would It was an amusing revelation for Abdul as I explained in a simpler way. I told him

‘What if the half-finished door made a creaky noise as it opens? In this scary surround, I shall shut my eyes to pretend the monster did not see me.’

I was now teasing. Abdul seemed to find his voice:

'I am sorry we had to stop at this deserted place. You will be too tired to walk the ten miles to Dawer. On my own I would have to press on and make it home to my warm bed in Dawer. We were late by an hour. The people here would be delighted to put us up for the night'.

'I am disappointed. I don't walk as fast'. I agreed 'We may cause a stir if they knew it is the doctor who is travelling.'

'Never mind Abdul, we are fated to spend the night here.'

I spoke in a low voice just so not to alert a human or animal;

'It will have to do Abdul, and we will add this to our experience when we tell everyone the story of this journey.' 'Tell me more about Kanzalwan. I have heard about this place. I know it is the base camp for the Indian army and people serve them with essential goods.'

'Yes sir' was the short reply.

Kanzalwan

Abdul was not highly educated but was full of knowledge about the history and geography of the whole region.

'Historically, for a time, India was ruled from this neighborhood'. Said Abdul It amazed me. I encouraged him to relate the whole chronology of Kanzalwan.

'Kanzalwan, as you see is uncharacteristic with staggered huts, some hardly visible from behind hills and snow. The village is a house of antiquities of archaeological importance. Kashmir was ruled by Buddhists from Asoka times and ruled India from this place.'

I was all ears. His storyline was a product of folklore passed down in his family and his keen interest in reading local history. I was amazed to discover the talent. He continued the thread.

'The last council of Buddhism is believed to have been held here. The ruins of the ancient *Sharada Peeth University* are preserved in this vicinity along the Neelam River. Buddhist University was established during the reign of Emperor Asoka in 273 BC. The 4th Buddhist Council under the Kushan Empire (30 Ce -230 Ce) was held here. The university is more than 5000 yrs old. Texts were written in Panini grammar'.

'Kashmir was referred to as Sharada desh by Kalhana the great historian. It is the Buddhist University established by Asoka in 273 BC and the 4th Buddhist council summoned by emperor Kanishka in 141 AD that has made significant landmarks on record'.

'16th-century visit from the Mogul rulers made an impact and is well recorded. Abu'l-fazl ibn, Mubarak was one of the nine Ministers or Nava Ratnas of Akbar who visited the Peeth. He wrote that the University was on river Madhumati now Neelam that is full of gold particles. The sparkle of fast-flowing water must

have been an inspiration that he predicted miracles would happen on every 8th day of the month. People of Kashmir are waiting. May be an eight of a month will bring a merger of the divided country'.

The Hut

We arrived at the only place of accommodation visible. The hut exterior was finished with planks of weatherboard. It was a single storied four rooms Hansel & Gretel type construction and overlapping rows of wooden planks covering all external walls. This is a feature in architecture to fend-off cold and snow. The tiles made from the tree bark were ornate decorating its exterior at the entrance. The fire-place was underneath a chimney and had been used before. The hut is designed to provide shelter as a stopover for travelers like occasional tourists and us. It is waiting to be finished off.

Abdul set himself on the job of making fire and some food giving me a chance to reflect on the setting and surround. A contrast with modernity apparent with no hot bath neither a sofa to lounge on nor a warm, soft quilt to tuck in, altogether very basic to the level of adventure. This was my first and last experience in half-finished abandoned hut. All in the name of an expedition that will be memorable. It could have been worse. In our itinerary, we had planned to reach Gurez. I was slow and snow storm on Razdhani was unprecedented.

We are now in the safety of this wooden shack. Abdul found a plank of wood and started burrowing into the snow for a way out of the hut for a place to use as a toilet. He managed to open the door and started a fire with the remains of the implement he used for digging. We were desperate for a hot drink. Our stocks of victuals were running out fast. I said

‘I am desperate for a cup of tea and feeling the chill. Can you manage to stoke up the fire?’

Abdul nodded without saying a word. It made me feel as if I was expecting too much. The hot tea and nuts perked me up but the exhaustion and fatigue caught up with me, and I was heavy-eyed ready to sleep. The bed made was the chador on the plywood sheet and my own clothes. A carpenter’s tool kit offered the likes of a pillow.

Tired but mentally alive, I tried to read a story to myself. In rumination, I related two incidents of my near-death experiences from when I was a child and the other times of my second life when I saved a drowning man. Abdul was a hesitant audience nevertheless he listened for a while, but I soon heard his rhythmic snore albeit I continued. Turning on my side, I said. ‘

‘It must be common for people to have experienced near-death situations, but in my case it happened in striking ways on two different occasions and both in 2 different rivers.

'The First time was when at age five I remember vividly I slipped from the stone bank of the river and as a gust of whorled wave engulfed me in river Jehlum and drifted me towards the 4th bridge near to where we lived in the city. I was driven by the strong underwater current downstream. I recall floating down the river at speed. My young mind felt a strange sense of joy and fear in an epiphany that filled my young mind still underwater and still holding my breath. Suddenly a hand grabbed my hair and dragged me to surface way down the river. I was saved by my uncle, who appeared from behind me at speed and took me ashore. He took me to the river to teach me swimming and lost me as he turned. Moments more, he could not have caught up with me in the fast current. A moment of fateful epiphany, the river would have swallowed me for good.'

Abdul well and truly sleeping I had to persist in my revival story in order to make the narrative to match this afternoon escape to life. I said,

'The second time was when my life was threatened in the Ganges River. This time I saved the life of a drowning fellow medical student and stayed down with my clothes on to find him. I found him fortunately for me; he was dead weight because he had given up the struggle and resigned to nature and was unconscious now. In the event he was still struggling; he was conscious he would have grabbed me hard and restrained my ascent from surfacing. We were both dead. My own weight and his added to his desperate

grab and our clothes to lift him to the surface meant I had to give up and meet my fate or struggle free to surface without him. I was widely acclaimed in the college and newspapers and given a gold medal.

Abdul was mentally out of range, and I was on my own ruminating.

I was now sleeping. This was a REM sleep, a superficial level stage where rapid eye movements occur and at this level you dream. A deeper level follows called Non-REM sleep where, dreams are not a feature.

My reverie, an epiphany yet again

I forced myself to drift off and managed half sleep with the makeshift bed and all my heavy clothes on. This second attempt to sleep was an effort because I was too tired. I used my formula to get sleep and set my mind at reminiscence into a reverie that I replayed before. I wanted to think of a theme that would absorb me and soothe me into sleep. Every time I set my mind working on day dreaming I thought of the origins of my own life. What was I like when I was in the making inside my mother's womb? I remember details.

This is an epiphany from my unborn life. A tiny life-form floating in amniotic fluid I tumbled over and over the warm waters in absolute silence except for the sound of heartbeat that was my own. The vivid phantasm revealed my body curled up, floating gently down a dark tunnel with so many different luminous

objects surrounding me. These were like constellation of small light bulbs rotating as they kept me company downwards. Apart from the lights bulbs like structures there were millions of shimmering particles like sand also travelling downwards with me. I was surrounded in all directions by these objects in the mist of shining dust.

Floating down into the unknown depths, my body felt light as a feather and taking summersaults in harmony with my companion objects. My hands were trying to touch and grab whatever came in my way, but everything seemed so slimy that it slipped off my grip, leaving my hand empty. I felt innate joy. There was music of silence to hear and my mind was in rhythm with the gentle ambience. At the bottom of the tunnel, there were multiple outlets to caves that looked like black holes. I found myself clinging to the objects around me and not letting myself be pushed to be drifted into these caverns. I succeeded to tumble over in an upward direction.

There were no other human voyagers like me, and I kept struggling to spring back up to surface as if I was swimming and throwing my arms to climb. I did surface in the end and entered a commune of living objects like myself. I found myself happy and smiling in the comfort of my bed inside the womb of my mother. It was like real and I pictured this experience as a preview journey of the lifetime of exciting events of my life that were punctuated by tumultuous

movements in my communion with people in growing years. I relapsed into this dream a few times when I faced some daunting challenges. It worked this time. I drifted off to sleep.

Abdul was up early. The coffee in the flask had finished, and I felt guilty having consumed most of the reserves to keep stimulated as an addict and also to keep warm. Abdul had an answer to all problems.

'I have my stocks of special blend tea leaves that will revive the dead'.

He produced a pouch and started the errand. I said:

'I am relieved. I know we are behind time and should have made it to Dawar. It was my slow progress in walking.'

I heard Abdul scurrying around to find a pan. He managed to light a fire in the fireplace that was no more than an open chimney. He mused:

'No sir you were better in pace than most others, but if I were on my own I would be stretching in my room in Dawar.'

Abdul used an abandoned empty tin to brew tea. Water from the lump of snow was handy and in no time tea was brewing. It was wet and warm and tasted delicious in the circumstances. We finished the rest of the crumbs, mainly dry fruit.

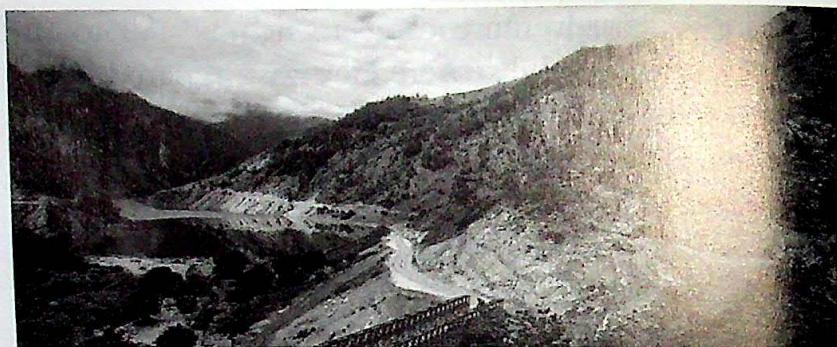
It was early and the snow outside was emitting light that shone through the windows.

One more misadventure came to light. All to my absolute disgust as I discovered tea was prepared in the empty tin that still had some emulsion hardly visible in the dim light. We had been drinking tainted tea blue from the leftover emulsion by the workers. No wonder it tasted good with no sugar or milk added. I was concerned for both of us. I said to Abdul, 'Show me your tongue Abdul.'

I saw his tongue was crimson blue. I spat on the snow outside and created a blue impression like the map of India on a brilliant white background of flat snow. I reassured Abdul that no harm would come with emulsion. We washed our mouth and got ready for the journey.

I examined his tongue again, and Abdul did mine. Not enough to decipher the color of the tea or the taste. I did not complain and had no idea how to treat a self-inflicted overdose of emulsion. The paint that was meant for the walls was lining out stomachs now.

I was a young physician and not used to trying the limits of my physical or mental endurance. I was now barely conscious enough to listen to the tales of the mountains my guide was narrating to amuse me as we set off.



10

Friday of the second week of Feb. 1959, we set off from Kanzalwan towards Dawar.

We stopped halfway after two hours brisk walk at the Budwan Fishing Lodge. This place was a paradise for anglers for fishing and a stopover destination. On the wooden plank in the veranda a scribble in large letters read:

Fishing Lodge Budwan

A sign on the wall

'If you are hungry, don't come fishing.'

The implied meaning was that all young fish must be returned to the waters.

The river supports world-class trout with an average weight of 11 kilograms (24 lb). Fish in the river include the Brown trout (*Salmo trutta fario*) and the Rainbow trout (*Salmo gairdneri*) unmatched to other sources in Kashmir. The fish make a display by looping out as scintillating darts and disappear in the gushing waters. The trout swim against the flow of the river and

¹⁰ Road from Kanzalwan to Dawar. It starts through an avenue of trees

toughen up in the process. As I said, that is why they are unmatched in taste from trout that is farmed or live in slow rivers. The flying ducks are perched on trees with hawkish eyes to hunt the fish. These birds may hunt fish, but themselves become a catch for the hunters.

My eyes were feasting the spectacle of the trout fish taking summersault out of the water, sparkling in sunshine and dancing to the tunes of the water meandering past the rocks. What was worth pondering is why the trout was swimming upstream against the force of gushing water. I was told later that trout from fast streams have bones and taste better with firm flesh that exercises resulted from. I wonder if they were preparing to feast our palate.

This place called Budwan has at the time of writing now disappeared off the map and those of us who have been familiar with the place freeze with emotion and nostalgia. Local voice of people protest has been muted and is not appreciated. A reservoir is constructed named after the river that drowned the beautiful fishing lodge, a dream destination for anglers and its surrounding village to create electricity from a hydro-electric dam. Some homes are submerged but the electricity generated will go to faraway places but not Gurez. The Gurez valley and its entire inundated region still have only a diesel generator that gives a gleam of light for half the living time. It was a controversial undertaking that provoked dissension

between India and Pakistan and on international dimension in Indus Water Treaty.

For now, Abdul seemed to know the staff at the lodge, and after a brief introduction, we enjoyed a sumptuous meal. The river Neelam takes a bend and creates alcoves where the trout are seen dancing up and down.

Revived fully we made for the road and enjoyed the company of the gusting river spitting occasional drops of cool white water on our face. Perhaps one of the most beautiful scenes in the whole of the Kashmir is the grove of huge (giant) poplars through which the traveler enters the Gurez valley. This was an observation made by Walter Lawrence in *The Valley of Kashmir* (1895).

‘A lesson to learn, Abdul; no one must cross the mountains on Fridays’ Abdul not expecting my question stumbled on a loose fallen stone. Recovered, he said:

‘Yes, the legend goes that the mountains get angry and the spiritual forces that control travel are in conflict and do not stand by you.

‘You have been very good Abdul’ I increased my pace now. He said:

‘From this part of the journey, it is plain sailing.’

On the way, you could not help but get absorbed in the excellence of the gushing water full of inspiring views for its crystal blue splashing exuberance as it strikes the stones and ruddy shores. The stream flows into Pakistan part of Kashmir where its name is changed to

Neelam River for its blue sparkle. It bisects the valley of Gurez and valleys beyond in the middle, meandering through the foothills and fields to follow the contours of the country. It is fortified by the majestic peaks on all four sides. The road has been built to run alongside the stream or near it. The trout fish are seen leaping and dancing up and down. I ventured into the bank of the stream and treated myself to a face wash in order to freshen up and bring some sense of normality in my appearance. After all, I will visit my domain of work as an officer well respected. A waiting crowd will hopefully receive me. The scenery along the side of the road and the aroma of the environment seemed to put a spring in my step, and I seem to be cruising away without feeling tired. As I approached habitation, there were trees with young green leaves on which had deposited shimmering flakes of snow and budding blossoms competing in their part of decorating the trees. The day was breaking, and the morning sun was shining on the slopes that opened a window of distant views ahead. At places, there were no people about, and we were breaking into a vista of complete stillness of exquisite calm.

Chapter 8

Dawar hospital

Maiden spring 1959

It was a three-hour gentle walk and now the late morning approaching midday that I finally arrived at my place of posting in Dawar village, the metropolis of Gurez and my final destination. The hospital staff comprising of two nursing assistants and a domestic were among a huge crowd of local people waiting to greet me. It seemed like I had returned from a pilgrimage or like a repeat of setting off from home a few days ago. In the crowds were groups of many dozens of local men in robes extending to their feet and children with brilliant white teeth hiding their arms inside their long robes or *pharons*. Faced with an awe-inspiring reception was almost embarrassing. People from all age groups came streaming in to greet me. Men clad in long robes wearing no trousers and their fingers judder knitting socks with wooden needles seemed, at first sight, a disgrace to masculinity but when they spoke to me with such affable manners, I was impressed with their manner. There are multiple stories to tell with my experience in Gurez, but some are striking.

I managed to sum up the courage to offer greetings. Having received an enthusiastic response in return, I managed a little speech:

'I am very glad to see real people after two days of nearly getting lost in the mountains. I must be thankful to Abdul, who saved my life'.

I skewed my stride, demonstrating my physical state and walked towards the front row and shook as many hands as possible. They cheered and spoke in a local accent I later fell in love with. I deciphered some words:

One elderly man was the first one to speak.

'*Manzil Mubarak* (Congratulations for safe arrival). When we saw the signs of angry mountains, we all prayed for you.'

I was now introduced to my hospital staff; the skeletal few included my compounder and first assistant Ali Murtaza, two theater assistants Rahim and Karim and Jan Bibi a woman who would be the makeshift gynecologist but in actual fact more so an experienced midwife. Gulam Mohomed or Gulama as he was known was the maintenance engineer. Three others Qadir and Rahim were cleaners and Rahman was the gardener. Ali was the key figure who was in control. The most important man for me was the store keeper, the trusted man Hyatt dedicated to my personal needs in housekeeping and cooking. All consumables in the hospital were in his custody.

The welcome was comparable to the ovation politicians get in anticipation of a public address. I made notes in my mind deciphering population I will have to live with and be in their service to be responsible for all their

medical needs. Village elders with tanned rugged faces, some ailing women who were waiting to see the face of the new doctor so they would be able to unload their ageing disorders and grumpy old moans and groans about their husbands and children. At first sight, they saw in me an upright gentleman from the town, disappointed perhaps if they can unload chronic ailments to this young man with thick dark hair and looking ruffled with the journey.

The local employees dominated the crowd coming to witness a new event. The school teacher, the police station officer and the head of administration in Gurez the deputy Revenue officer Sheikh Barkat Ali, all people who mattered in local administration were present.

It was very striking to see the total civil society and representative of the government take time off work and assemble to receive the new doctor. This shows how small governing constituency constituted in Gurez. I was in control, albeit embarrassed to the point of feeling warm flushes in my earlobes. I did not expect this at my first encounter with public life. I had so many people put me centre stage of dogged attention. It seemed I must succeed in this test and make a speech of some sort. I tried not to fumble:

'I am very grateful to all of you for coming away from your place of work and receive me. I am determined to prove to you that I will serve you in the best way I can'.

I was interrupted by the DRO who barged in exuberantly:

'Ha Ha, my friend doctor is also making a speech. Leave that job to us, Doctor. I am Barkat, and you are my guest tonight at dinner. Everyone that matters in Gurez will be there in your honor. I have managed to get special meat; you may not have tasted before'.

A big bear hug with Barkat was a part of the introduction.

'OK, Mr Barkat. I will be delighted. I will have time to rest in the afternoon.' I said. I will make acquaintance with all in one night.'

The police officer, larger than life awe-inspiring tall personality, appeared pushing past others in the crowd. He seemed to be making his presence known by a loud outburst of his own introduction. He said.

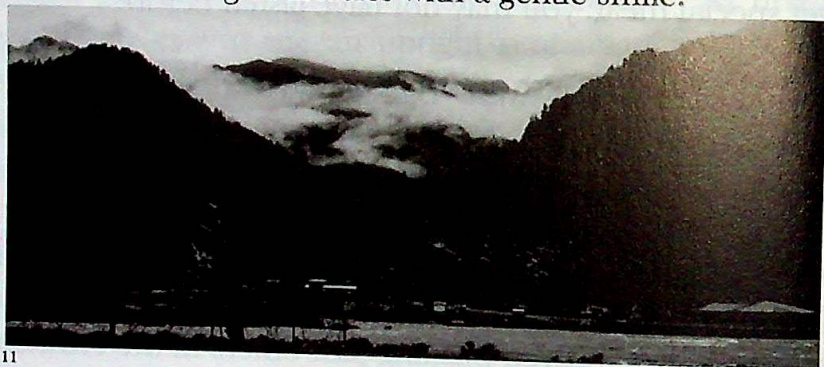
'Salam doctor I am Arif Khan. We live like a big family here in Gurez and keep law and order in control. As you have already known, we shall be meeting tonight at DRO residence, the top office of administration here. You will be happy here, I assure you. I am rushed now and have to go. Welcome abode your new home with us.'

A new environment for me, I replied in the best friendly manner I could.

'Thanks mate. With friends like you, it already feels like home. I will see you later.'

I realized that this was a small placid community in contrast with a metropolis with a large noisy but vibrant local society. Everyone was trying to make me feel at

home, fearing that I may find it desolate and too primitive and make plans to flee back to civilization. I could feel everyone was relaxed. I was especially impressed by the men from the villages dressed in long robes extending courtesies with a gentle smile.



11

My workplace

I concluded social interaction by saying goodbyes and turned around facing my staff making my official position assertive and started making some changes. As I went through the first few days of consultations, a pattern began to emerge. I was escorted for a round of the Health Centre by everyone on duty. One bed was occupied in the six-bed ward by a woman. She had a breast abscess drained by the compounder who is the second in command of the hospital. I was impressed and wanted to know how he had done the procedure. I was thrilled at the thought of my position as the chief. The compounder Ali was a key figure. This post is extinct now. Compounder was a name given because

¹¹ Kishanganga river rushing down the creek. (Waseem Andrabi)

they were dispensers, made mixtures and ointments. They also were theatre assistants and filled in the frequent absence of the doctor with a stethoscope around their neck.

The other staff on my round was the midwife Jana Bibi, Gulama, and Qadir and Hyatt who followed me round waiting to take orders for lunch.

There was no rank hierarchy. Everyone did any job that needed doing if he was capable. The cleaner can wash his hands and help Ali with dressing a wound if need be. No protocol in the assignment of duty is regimented. Rahman, when he is not cleaning the toilet, he puts his hand on applying plaster of Paris and its removal. He is allowed like others to perform superior jobs, so they call themselves hospital workers. He is pleased that his status is enhanced for the time he is engaged in the job. Similar crossover of duties is common.

While I was on my rounds, I noticed eyes peeping through the windows. I asked Jana about this tress pass.

'Sir, they are patients. They will have heard the doctor has arrived.' Jana Said. I showed signs of irritation and addressed Ali, my second in command.

'Ali you must make it known that from now on except urgent cases I will see all patients in outpatient clinic starting sharp at 930 in the morning, every day except Sundays' Ali did not seem excited except to nod in affirmative.

'Yes, I will pass the word around. It may be some time before they will comply. They have been coming at all times as a habit and we are resident staff and do not turn them away. Ali stopped realizing he may have overstepped his response and promptly agreed:

'We will train them to keep a distance from you. You are not like others who were stopped on the wayside by people for a quick consultation.'

He looked at me for a comment.

'Ali, you have worked in big hospitals. We will start outpatient cards and put strict recording system in place of all patients'

I was now making plans to make this miniature hospital look like an institution. All I needed was a bunch of medical students to follow me on ward rounds. I suppose I could make the cleaners fill that job.

There was a time set for when patients could come. In my advance planning, bringing time schedule was a priority. Doctors before me had stayed in bed till woken up or spent evenings at work, usually paid or rewarded. Compounder Ali did all the doctoring in the absence of a doctor and had round the clock contact with people. He made money on the side.

The Hospital was now functional at an average pace, and I entrenched the concept of time in the running disciplines like minor operation day, maternity ante-natal clinics where the midwife did most of the assessments. We started basic investigations. At this

was looking good, but everyone including cleaners was unhappy for losing extra incentive like bags of rice for help with dressing on the finger, a prepared amputative prepared from the dispensary. I was working out a means of this extra bonus that has been lost. I devised a solution.

‘Ali, you know people pay money and bags of rice when they have visited the hospital. You discretely put aside what comes and give a share out to all.’

‘Make sure my private practice starts after hospital hours, and I get paid for home visits.’

The population of Gurez lives in a series of hamlets tucked in on the east side of the River leaving the western aspect envelope for the wild. I requisition for more equipment to upgrade facilities. I was chuffed with the prospect of performing operations with the intention of taking an appendix out and be in control of the total procedure without the services of qualified assistants or an anesthetist. After all, that would be better than to rely on nature cure alone. In summer months on my advice and after the first line of treatment the patient would be transported by four volunteers on a stretcher made from branches of trees wrapped in a blanket, across 40 miles of a mountain trek. The journey was made with the help of volunteers usually unrelated to the patient and this cooperative service passed down from ancestors and nobody got paid.

There was no prospect of advancing my profession in this desolate place in the academic domain and there was no way it would make the much needed financial triumph for me either. All the same, I knew virtue brings its own reward. Gurez is a far cry from the cutting edge technology of medical science, but I did not feel deprived. I was about to embark on the most exhilarating and rewarding mission of my life that I not only dearly cherish at the time but still do after six decades of tumbles great and small my life has taken since.

It is the diversity of complaints that enter your outpatient door. As you would imagine, patients came in from earache to painful periods to a swollen knee. This was a paradise I cherished and vanquished the challenges in my profession but the experience is so varied my work in Gurez to me was the magnum opus of my entire life. Working in Gurez and being subsumed by nature, there was a perceptible touch of spirituality and the inner joy that even today traverses every fiber of my body. I was enriching my soul or at least it felt like it. The people looked up to you, and their innocent gestures carved an impression of implicit trust in you. I am struck with emotion to recall how sincerely they were grateful for small help. In innocent gestures of gratefulness, they may have shown that emotion by making a present of a bag of walnuts or even a live chicken but the signs of true feelings were there to see.

As time went by I was more confident in my practice of medicine; I seemed to have coped well. The consensus in this society was that maladies not cured completely were accepted as God sent castigation for a wrong done by the patient or his parent if he was an infant. What intriguingly challenged my professional efficacy were not physical ailments that confronted me on a daily basis but purely psychological dilemmas. On one occasion, a young patient was brought in with breathing problems. On this instance, I found myself at risk of the need for help. It was not long before I diagnosed asthma of psychosomatic origin. I examined this teenage girl and heard breath sounds with no spasm. I knew it was not organic. I prescribed an anxiolytic and reassurance. I was unaware for one macabre moment that I had spawned a long drawn problem that gave me many disturbed nights and agony.

It was late at night days later this girl was carried by her brother accompanied by all members of the family with a crisis for difficult breathing. She was laid on the table convulsing with blue lips and curled up body. I ordered an injection of Diazepam to be drawn and planted the oxygen mask on her face. Even before the injection was administered, she opened her eyes and spoke.

'Doctor; Save me please. My heart runs away from me and I cannot breathe.'

She held my hand tight. I was bent over close to her body trying to hold back convulsions. I instantly knew as she spoke that she was hyperventilating. I covered her face with her own scarf. Talking helped her, and her breathing settled. Satisfied that we are dealing with hysteria, I managed to explain the science behind the cause of her symptoms. I said:

'We are dealing with Hyperventilation with her quick and hard breathing. She gets rid of gas called carbon dioxide that your body needs. Less CO₂ also increases PH from acid to alkaline leading to alkalosis that constricts or makes smaller brain blood vessels causing lowering of consciousness. The treatment is to make the patient breathe into a bag or a cap where she breathes her own CO₂ that will bring blood chemistry to be normal'.

The girl listened with interest and calmed down her breathing. Convulsions stopped. She managed to smile, and I continued speaking to the intended audience:

I must be careful to be precise with medical jargon. I said

'Convulsions also occur in epilepsy or strokes, high fever and other conditions. It is important you see the whole patient where the diagnosis is important, but in a healthy young girl it is usually hysteria. A simple remedy for you is to make them breathe into a bag. They breathe in back their own CO₂ and cramps stop.'

In my outpatient surgery after a week, the girl came complaining of pain in arms from the convulsions but it was apparent that she was overstating her symptoms. She was the last in the list and I did not rush. Her name on the card was Shaila, and I addressed her: 'Shaila you are worried about some things in your mind that make you poorly'.

My hand on her pulse, I noticed a rapid increase of the pulse and to the detriment of my own pulse, she placed her other hand on my hand that was monitoring her pulse. What is worse, she held my hand down very firmly. She wore a cheap large ring with a turquoise stone dominating her pale dainty hand like a bunch of stamens in a daisy. Her misty eyes were fixed on me, with a penetrating look complemented by a hidden smile that left me completely defenseless. In my earlier examinations of the girl, my professional concern dominated and her personal attributes did not feature. I forced my hand out from her grip belittled like a mortified little boy in an um and ah mode unuttered.

'You will need to bring your mother with you next time and I will explain further treatment to her.' I managed to utter the words, turning my eyes to the attendant.

I did not wait for her reply or wait for her to stand from her stool and leave the room. I retired to private chambers to find space to recover. This was transference syndrome or merely a crush a girl

patient had grown for her doctor. I must be on my guard. It was a difficult task as we will see. She was naïve, and I held myself back to be lured into a moral debt by the devil. No prior knowledge of medical science could help me because I had to overcome my own faltering weakness, the Hippocratic Oath and my future in Gurez. It was no surprise that her visits to the hospital were frequent. She threatened openly that if she was prevented from her visits she would be ill. On one such visit I was more explicit. I said to her:

‘Shaila you are a grown-up girl with so many people that care for you. You must stop making a fool of yourself and coming to see me so often.’

She was crimson red augmenting the color on her face and in a faltering voice replied:

‘Have I ever asked for a personal favor from you? I just want to come and see you and feel your presence near. I cannot sleep and my pain in the lower chest becomes intense at home. I take your medicine and get relief.’

The infatuated Shaila unwittingly kept strings festooned in my heart, reminding me that some part of me was a human being. The oath effectively rescued me in my tracks.

“In every house where I will enter for the good of my patients, I will keep myself far from all intentional ill-doing and all seduction especially from the pleasure of love”(Hippocrates)

How do I cope with situations like this, I had no idea. I fumbled about professional ethics in simple words translated in the local dialect and compromised on her coming to see me as often as she wants to be provided she is accompanied by a relative. This virtual affair wore off as time went by and the recurrent drill of taking blood pressure and reassurance was killjoy for her.

Every morning I stepped in my clinic there was work waiting for me? A message preceded my arrival delivered to the hospital that the doctor was on his way. The natural result was a huge crowd of patients not willing to wait their turn. The next day I went through an extensive outpatient list and spent the afternoon performing minor operations like ingrown toenails, little lumps and cysts.

Apart from spiritualists, quacks and practitioners of ancient medicine dotted round in the foothills and interspersed in far-flung hamlets our medical centre stood out as the only peep into modern medical science. Doctor has to take the ancillary staff into confidence if he stands a chance against the competition with the quacks and if he has to survive. The challenges that come contesting the medical doctor are not another medical practitioner but the entrenched spiritual healers who perform miracles. The doctor is revered almost to the level of the village priest because he is in the business of healing that is considered to be an act ordained by the Lord. Any

chance the doctor gets to cut people up for an abscess or lump or a sowing up job after cuts, his singular status in the competition stands a chance.

In practice, it is the ancillary hospital staff that makes or breaks the doctors' survival in reputation. In times of peace and harmony with them when an emergency arrives at the door, they are the first line of management and start the drill of drips and administering oxygen, monitor blood pressure and vital signs before the doctor arrives and makes a diagnosis. If the patient lives, you have already performed a miracle and when he dies, the relatives have been convinced that the outcome was the will of Almighty God or the illness was too far gone and destined to take his life. No coroner is involved anywhere within reach to ascertain the cause of death or the truth. These basic controls that improve the standard of medical service are wanting.

You will agree general practice is 90% of routine illness that Ali could manage. The 10% new patients need investigation before definitive treatment can be instituted. The doctor is not infallible and above blame unless otherwise named as incompetent. If however the doctor does not play his cards right with the staff and accept their misdeeds like corruption, then everything goes wrong and the blame converges on the doctor. The reputation of the doctor is crucial for his survival in the job and important to bring in private practice patients and home visits. You soon

learn that it works for all in a teamwork spirit and you become a part of the plan.

At first, it is hard to be complicit in this malpractice, but in time ethical principles get frayed. A call from the remote corner of your mind keeps knocking the message that is you forgetting moral bondage to your sacred profession? I knew I was drifting into the morass of low-grade medical practice. The best I could do is having a tight grip on the science of medicine in curing malfunctions of body and mind and alleviating suffering.

Accidents were few and far between, and speed on the roads was not a problem. My set-up could not cope. In emergencies, the only choice for us was to administer primary palliation and allow nature to take its course. Surgical emergencies posed a challenge. Cutting open a body under local anesthesia and basic ventilation was attempted in desperate situations. Ectopic pregnancy and appendicitis patients would be a challenge.

Circumcisions were popular and rewarding. I encouraged people to bring the newborn babies for the procedure explaining to them that sensory nerves are not developed at that age and local anesthesia was not necessary and the added advantage of the procedure memory vanishing from the brain of the child. There are some boys having late circumcision that may harbor circumcision complex problems showing in child delinquency. The gifts on this occasion are shared by all. There are celebrations.

In all other small operative procedures undertaken, the whole extended family waits anxiously at the door in order to get an update of the operation. Tried and tested management of patients and public dealing is drilled into the working practice. A wealthy patient may have a lamb waiting outside the theatre, and as soon as he or she is wheeled into the bed on the ward after surgery a live lamb is catapulted over the patient as a sacrificial exercise and donated to the hospital. It may end up in the greedy doctors living quarters. In the outpatients, I made a conscious effort to resist the temptation to accept bribe like a sac of walnuts or a live chicken. That was normal and treated as a token of appreciation, a euphemism for corruption in broad daylight.

A plus point that favors the doctor is absolute faith in God. People are resigned to accept fate, and my job was to reinforce their beliefs by using finesse and resourcefulness. Examination with a stethoscope was essential no matter where the problem lay. Even if it was an in-growing toenail I was dealing with, the whole body was examined. If I found that I am dealing with a religious patient, it will help if I recite a sermon while listening to his chest. I will instantly gain his confidence.

Medical literature has scanty detail on the art of practice and how to cope in actual interactive practice situated out in challenging situations. In this ambivalent divergence of practicing medicine strictly as

the book says and what is practiced in real-time situations are two different things. I was excited and scared at the same time that I was an independent doctor in full charge of an institution?

Going over those days I feel, I was too young to shoulder responsibly of the job. Just turned twenty and jumping years of formative education did not help. My travails in the mountains of Gurez were punctuated by high pitch stress waves, and it is these moments that stirred memories of my early days. I could not but help remember my childhood as far back as a baby suckling and screaming, and then my older days at school and college.

Tuberculosis

Gurez was a virgin soil for any epidemics especially tuberculosis. No one had ever suffered from the illness before. The influx of army and their contact with other people exposed them to tuberculosis. With no prior contact and no immunity they succumbed with each flare-up of infection.

This was a common story from the patients that visited my clinic. It soon became apparent that no vaccination teams had ever entered this county and they were unprotected. I used the local army facility to wireless health authorities in the capital city of Srinagar to dispatch vaccination teams urgently. This was the month of May, and the snow on the mountains had thawed and the road through the mountains was passable to jeep traffic. Tuberculin and BCG

Vaccination teams arrived and started testing and vaccinating all across the population. A large %age turned positive. All Children were immunized with BCG. There were a large number of active cases for whom I obtained drugs from the department and still a large number of burnt-out cases that may have hidden nidus. We needed a mass x-ray and I approached military hospital in Kanzalwan who agreed. It was a common threat.

First time in my life, I felt I had embarked on a worthwhile job on a mass scale. In the coming days, vaccinations were performed and anti-TB drugs were made available. My experience was limited for a general practitioner, but I managed the majority of work in outpatients. Asthma and bronchitis were common and I had enough supplies of medicines for these problems. Lifestyle diseases like diabetes and heart conditions were not common but high blood pressure was common possibly because of high altitude, and salt tea was responsible. The major problems were kept breathing life and given symptomatic relief to prepare them for a long journey to a hospital if the road was passable. It is customary to nominate the four men from the village as they are no relation to the patient most times.

The winters in Gurez were a great experience. My greatest fears struck me when patients walked in through the surgery door, and I was not sure if I had the medicines or the equipment to deal with his

problem. I would have to rely on my ingenuity to effectively use makeshift treatments and symptomatic relief. I sterilized cotton from the tailor shops by boiling it at high temperature for suturing material and contrived a mixture of local herbs for poultices. Bandages and plaster were always in short supply, and local materials were substituted.

My greatest satisfaction came from the maternity cases. I had an uphill struggle to persuade people the benefits of assisted labor in delivery of babies. The village midwife was I competition at the opposite end claiming success with her craft tested and tried for centuries. Some mothers and babies did not make it but those were nature's percentages imposed on humanity and acceptable. My concern was this percentage. I tried to bring awareness about ante-natal care and how to tackle complications like infections and toxemias.

I started for the first time pre-natal assessment routine testing urine and blood pressure. I had my success when I performed the first episiotomy in the home of the village chief. I managed to deliver a difficult breach using morphine for pain relief. Supply of drugs was critical and each item was only used if nothing else worked. As an example, people did not receive pain relief for labor. They did not expect it and when the pain did feature as a problem the relatives prepared a concoction of local herbs topped up with a recitation of verses, and all stages of labor would proceed effectively unhindered.

Here the intervention by the priest was irritatingly paramount because he would have given the patient a scribbled note folded into the smallest size packet possible and sewn inside a cloth cover to be worn as a pendant all the time. No one was ever allowed to open to see what was written in this *taweez* as they were warned if they did; the outcome may be a reversal of the benefits achieved. The scribble inside this mysterious relic has not been decoded when one did get examined. It revealed no more than a game of knots and crosses. As long as it worked to allay pain and anxiety it was welcome. It saved the use of resources that were always at a premium to alleviate pain.

A baby born makes history

Today at my usual time, I was at my clinic desk when a crowd of women entered accompanied by the screams of a baby. A woman was carrying the baby in a willow basket placed on her head. She was like a saleswoman trying to sell her merchandise with an exuberant smile on her face. That tells me nothing serious is the purpose of their visit. Instead, I recognized them to be the women in the chorus. I was in luck. Today the singers normally a part of my indulgence in an idealistic reverie were reincarnated into living humans dispelling my illusion of a fantasy. The diva in the group stood out and she grins at me, her hair wet and curly round her face. I addressed the woman with the baby.

“What is the baby doing in that willow basket on your head?”

I demanded with authority that all patients here expect from the doctor. I was still rubbing my eyes and seemingly to the audience annoyed at this early visit. All other girls had deposited their willow baskets outside in my forecourt, except this one. She lowered her load from her head and like a manger she had made a bed in the basket for the baby with a folded garment. Laid with his eyes shut was this little human being whimpering. My question was answered by the girls stood beside the one with the basket lowered on the floor. She said;
'This is my newborn. I gave birth to the baby. It all happened up there in the mountains.' She paused
'This morning.'

I have never heard of a woman delivering a baby and walking to the hospital. Taking my eyes off the baby, I looked at the mother. I was startled to notice the resemblance. She must have read my mind and started giggling. I was mesmerized when I saw the girl with the full set of her brilliant white teeth. I was compelled to frame her face in my imagination like a Madonna figure with her jet black hair disheveled like the branches of weeping willow covering her raised pale cheeks and large dark eyes. She kept a subdued smile nervously displaying the striking dimples. It seemed a sculptor handcrafted her face behind those trembling large pink lips. The little human being in the manger struck a resemblance and this was her in postpartum state.

To me, it was a phenomenon. She delivered out there in the open fresh air and lost some blood that was promptly controlled by tying umbilical cord and cutting the end off with grass sheers. The afterbirth and placenta was buried in a deep hole.

She stammered a little moaning voice as she held the baby as he was taken out from the makeshift cradle and placed on the examination table.

This was a miracle case. How can she look so well after the ordeal of childbirth in the wilderness of mountains with the danger of wild animals and driftwood waste as her maternity bed? I examined the woman on the couch. She was still bleeding per vagina, but her friends had delivered the afterbirth while she lay on grass in the woods. I was mystified on the verge of an embarrassing encounter. I summoned the midwife and asked her to take over.

I saw the two-hour old baby wrapped in women's' head covers and replaced the straw tied round the umbilical stump with a sterile dressing. I gave the mother an injection of antibiotic and went out to speak to the crowd waiting outside.

"What in the name of Providence was this woman doing fetching firewood so remote in the hills if she was full term and so near to delivering a baby?"

"That is no problem with us; we like outdoor births in the fresh air with mother earth and grass as our bed and the skies over-head watching!" This was her second

baby. She had her first baby at home,' chuckled one woman.

One more woman at the back pushed forward through the crowd and came in support.

'Besides at home there is a lot of mess to clean and we have only one living room. This has happened before and we have experienced childbirth in the open.'

The other friend that played the midwife to deliver the baby explained that they had delivered babies while working before and said 'Farima (name of the mother) had her first baby at home and liked this birth better. We offered to carry the baby and get help and a stretcher but after an hour she insisted on walking back. She is very happy and told us she already had a name for him while he was screaming in the manger on our head. She called him 'Karim'.

I thought the more appropriate name would have been *Karamat* (a miracle in local language). I did not offer the change.

Virtual appendicectomy

One Quiet afternoon I prepared my staff to play this virtual game under my instructions and remember every step of the operation if I have to operate on myself they know what to do. In drilling home, the procedure, I took demonstration classes with all my staff including cleaners and relevant prospective surgeons and prepared them in a virtual exercise. I played the theatre of the procedure and had all concerned dressed up as best as facilities permitted, fitted out with a mask but without gloves. We had to economize on consumables or re-sterilize

them. This was a pretend game with a purpose in mind. A mirror fixed was hanging down from the ceiling with adjustable chains that offered a full view of my abdomen. The drapes in place the operating window was fashioned. I had already prepared a syringe of the local anesthetic in advance and laid out instruments on the tray. I helped to inject the local anesthetic myself. Now I was ready for taking them through the procedure and practice instructions; it was Ali who would take the knife.

‘Make the incision obliquely along the line I have drawn with methylene blue sterile ink. Be bold enough to cut the skin in one stroke but not go mad and unrestrained to let the knife blade cut through the intestine and blood vessels immediately under the skin’.

I thought for a moment in horror ‘How would I control that situation except to sit up and take charge myself with my own abdomen open and in full sight of bleeding intestine? That would be a marathon challenge to say the least. A set of clamps not used normally for this operation would have to be kept ready’.

Ali, the phantom surgeon, was trained to use the surgical knife on the leg of lamb meant for the evening meal. There is a special way to hold the knife and be in control of cutting, and the cut has to be deliberate in one stroke and not too forceful for obvious reasons! He was trained on the technique of tying knots and not

using granny knots but double reef knots that double back a reverse second time so it will not come undone. This is the first step in training a surgeon.

'Finger out the inflamed appendix still attached to the caecum, so I can see it in the mirror. Now clamp, tie and cut as demonstrated in the practice'.

It was important to tie a knot at the base of the appendix, so the total mass of the diseased appendage is excised. It was an ordeal to teach the use of a reef knot and avoid the granny knot on the base of the appendix. I have drilled in so many words and so many times to the surgical training team that they must never close the wound and stitch the skin until they have checked that no instruments or swabs have left inside the tummy. I had no chance to demonstrate on a real operation because no patient turned up in winter.

Life style diseases

The 40,000 strong corpus of humanity behind the mountains of Gurez lived and have lived for eons under the protection of Mother Nature; like survival of species theory postulates all curable ailments took their course and others took their toll, leaving behind survivors and handicapped. The Providence spared them the scourge of lifestyle diseases. No one in this hamlet would claim to be affluent and indulgence by definition was rare. People lived on a big meal with the bulk of carbohydrate *Pinga* or local rice and leafy vegetables. During my stay in Gurez, I did not have an

encounter with a fat man or woman or a high strung chain smoker. The only disease that dominated the region was systemic auto-immune and allergies related. Infections were common and as explained earlier claimed lives in epidemic proportions. I was the only God sent hope of providing any semblance of enlightenment in medical science and treatments available. The land route as already mentioned was passable for transporting emergencies on foot only during summers.

The winter was a dreaded event on the calendar. As the dark clouds gathered in the horizon, sending a sensation of the chill that will presage winter, people prepare for a long haul of hibernation, incarceration and eventful times. There are also the brighter prospects of the wonderful experiences that wintertime brings. People bring their herd inside and keep them in the rooms beneath where they themselves live. They feed and clean the animals who in turn keep them warm by the heat emanating from their bodies that circulates upwards to their living rooms a crucial life-saving device that in turn offsets the strong smell from the sweat and dung. They consume foods stored in earthenware drums as desiccated vegetables, pulses and corn. The village may have one house allotted to hang carcasses of sheep in attic space providing frozen meat from the open-air refrigeration. It may sound a cozy arrangement, but this lifestyle is beset with drawbacks. There is little washing done; therefore, it is expected that this parcel of humanity lives in consort

with living species of lower grades from those that nip and run to those that may bite and eat your supper. It is hoped for better days that keeps the spirits up that the spring arrives and people take their spades out to dig snow and make their way out to wander in the outside world. As they do, they greet each other; Next door neighbors may not see each other all winter except through small chinks in the small windows.

You can hear them saying

'Asalam Alaykum; It is a thrilling prospect to see we all made it through the winter.'

A woman cranes her neck through the half-open door and spots another venturing daylight in the house opposite.

'Walaykum Salam; I am so pleased to see you after all these months. You look good', replied the neighbor friend.

'I could see the roof of your house above the snow and part of the window through the snow. I knew you were all well. There was smoke emerging from the back chimney, and I knew you were doing fine'.

Smoke from burning wood for cooking was a sign of life inside the house. If no smoke was seen emitting from the house for a day or so, that was an ominous that all was not well with the family and some people ventured to emerge out of their igloos and help if needed.

How do they keep warm? Is a science in itself? As in other places in Kashmir singular to this part of the world is a mobile central heating device called the *Kangri*. It is an earthenware pot woven over in a willow basket and fitted with handles also made from willow is the contraption for mobile central heating. It contains live cinders covered with ash. It stays warm for a day or even night. The size of a football it is tucked inside long robes and blankets and carried everywhere. The coal used is derived from autumn leaves and driftwood chippings prepared in advance for the winter. It keeps them snug and warm through very harsh winters.

Some hazards accompany *Kangri*. Held close next to the skin of the abdomen for long periods of time caused a burn when the skin started breaking and ulceration occurred and left unattended develop a skin cancer. This cancer was reported by a surgeon E F Neve working in Kashmir in the early 1900s who stipulated constant irritation and contacted dermal heat as a cause of malignancy. First time in medical history, this clue about one cause of cancer was known to the world. *Kangri* cancer is rare now. *Kangri* is not used in direct contact with the skin of the abdomen.

The arrival of spring also meant good news and the bad news from all members of the community. It also meant the doctor received fewer numbers of patients, but the dread of emergencies always lurked in the background. What if appendicitis or a threatening ectopian pregnancy arrived? How would I cope? The

threadbare facilities for operating would have to be a starting base for the big undertaking. I had prepared a spinal set for epidural anesthetic.

The worst scenario would be to get appendicitis myself. How could I manage to operate on myself? It was a real worry. One day when all was quite on the battlefield and no sight of a patient I rehearsed with my staff all non-doctors but with medical background the prospect of performing an abdominal operation on my own body. I made a detailed list of preparations from the time I would lay on the table to the prospect of using a local anesthetic and completion of the operation. I have described the procedure above.

Tooth extraction

Practicing medicine with very basic facilities was an audacious challenge but fun. I used hospital supplies with the utmost caution, saving every piece of gauze and boiling it for reuse. There was no dentist anywhere in this huge expanse of forty miles and my fears came true when a young man came in screaming with a toothache.

‘Doctor, please do something’ Holding his face he said ‘My left upper jaw is seething with pain. I tried to chew on the cloves and herb mixture but nothing works. It is killing me.’

This robust young man was agonizing over his last molar half-eaten by caries. My instinct and no prior knowledge of dentistry obliged me to offer the only solution I knew. Extraction, I said:

'You left it too long to rot. I have no means to salvage the tooth. All I can do is to attempt at extracting it.'

I had seen a set of dental forceps in the operating theatre. I had to have a go at this offending tooth. My reputation was at stake. If I cannot take a tooth out what chance is there for mending a broken bone; the population would recognize? To them, a doctor is a dentist as well. I prepared the operating theatre, the only one for any procedure for this undertaking. The staff gawked with consternation.

'Are you sure?' They shouted without saying it.

I injected xylocaine into the gum covering the first left upper molar tooth and in a little while stood on the table holding the forceps with both hands and bending over the patient with my right knee rested on the table. There was no dental chair.

'This won't be long' I said nervously

As I pulled at the strong tooth, the young man pushed me off the table.

'OOOOUCH' The force of his shove was too much;

In that horrendous moment, I fell crashing down on the floor. The patient had succeeded in taking hold of the end of dental forceps still clamped to his ailing tooth and bolted through the door and out of the hospital. He seemed to run for his life as fast as he

could into the village streets with the dental forceps still applied to his tooth and holding the end with one hand. My hospital staff in their white coats gave him a chase gathering a marathon of inquisitive villagers chasing after them; when they caught up with him, they negotiated the return of the instrument he had in his mouth.

'He is robbing government property. That is an expensive piece of equipment he has in his mouth.' Shouted Ali to pacify the crowd and save the chaotic situation. In the end, a compromise was struck. He was given free of charge injection of antibiotic and a supply of painkillers.

My good luck saved my reputation, and he was cured of pain without the extraction. The local anesthetic had worked by now. He came in the next day to apologize. I made up the story that a pull and tug at the roots of the tooth were essential and that cured him when in fact the antibiotic did the trick. The word of the miracle cure worked for me and I started getting patients from far afield. They now preferred me to local herbal quake and in some cases even the priest.

Private practice

In my private practice, I was paid for out of hours service and home visits by bags of rice, eggs, and a live chicken and for a big reward a live lamb. I must have earned a lamb in the wintertime because the village butcher also did me the favor of a formal slaughter and

cleaning. There was no need to cut it because the carcass was tied to the ceiling by a metal rope in the unused room of my living quarters.

There was no heating in the room and in a day or so the hanging lamb was frozen over. My cook, who was also a member of the staff, hacked off with an axe a chunk of meat covered over with a thick layer of ice and cooked a delicious meal every day. The lamb lasted me for months and I tasted the most delicious meat ever in my life before or after my time in Gurez. You hardly need to cook the meat because the taste is so scrumptious and it is so tender that as soon you started to cook it, it was soft with a flavor never replicated anywhere in the world. Lamb reared in these mountain pastures graze on grass special to these parts. The herds are limited now and have been pushed into lower altitudes because army camps inhabit most of the free grazing lands.

It was a while before I settled in to live and find a routine. Hyatt, my orderly was my company at night meal time. All my associate guys lived far away and had their own staff to look after them. He always entertained me with tales of the past while in attendance. Any tale with relevance to my new position would have to be most absorbing, especially while he was watching every morsel I take in my mouth. I was sat with my meal and as is the customary practice, he sat in front of me watching me see if I was enjoying the meal or if there was more I wanted. It would not be his place to eat in my presence. That was

the custom. He would eat later in the kitchen. Assured that my meal was going down well into my body smoothly and I looked happy he went on:

Resting his right elbow on his knee and the corresponding hand to support his chin, he said in soft words:

‘One day the local butcher came in with a painful red eye’;

Hyatt had cooked a delicious meal for me. Amazed to find such culinary talent in this remote setting of our planet, I almost embarrassed him with my inquisitive looks focused on his face. I forgot I was steering. Albeit I made gestures that I paid attention to what he was saying. He continued:

‘The doctor who worked here was dedicated to his profession and knew his job. Unfortunately, as goodness has possibilities unlimited so has evil in the opposite direction and his weakness been manifest in greed’.

‘What do you mean?’ I almost shouted. I did not expect an employee of his level to make a comment maligning one of my colleagues. Albeit it was getting interesting and I did not stop him.

‘I am sorry, sir! I am relating the event as it was circulating in the village. It was a few years back.’

I readily forgave him because I was impatient to learn about what happened next and the rest of the scandal.

‘Carry on; only remember you could be saying these things about me when I am not here!’

‘Sir, I hope you stay with us for very many years because already people like you a lot.’

I pretended I did not hear that and felt a small blush showing on my cheek caused by a surge of flattery and hoping he did not notice. He continued:

‘The doctor discovered by using a magnifying glass that a small fragment of bone had lodged in his right eye, an expected event for a butcher chopping meat for his job. The butcher was kept ignorant of this diagnosis and given an eye ointment and painkillers free of charge. Relieved of pain and redness he arrived the next day with a pound of the best cut of lamb for the doctor. In a few days, the eye was sore again and the treatment was repeated after a good examination. The pound of lamb kept arriving and the treatment repeated for the total period of a year and then the meat suddenly stopped coming. Forced to be vegetarian for one day the doctor got worried and dispatched me to summon the butcher, at once.’

I interrupted Hyatt to pass me the glass of water. I could easily have helped myself to the glass because it was nearer to me and within my reach but instead I had to ask him to impress my authority that dictates he must make that extra effort and he did and continued the story:

‘The butcher was defiant and refused to come. Instead, he had scribbled on the back of a used sheet of paper his message that said;

'Doctor; In the name of your noble profession you are a fake. I was away in town and went to see a local doctor in a chemist shop for a supply of the ointment you usually give me. The doctor offered to look at my eye and in a moment removed a piece of bone from my eye with his little tweezers. I was given the gift of my life wrapped in tissue and he said I would need no more ointments and no more pain killers. I was flabbergasted. Here I was suffering pain and almost my sight for a greedy doctor. I said, good Heavens! I will have no need to part with the best piece of lamb for the likes of a doctor like you. You made me suffer for one year almost by leaving the piece of bone in my eye and enjoyed free supply of meat. I will ask about the price of meat.

'News travelled like wildfire. The doctor made a voluntary exit from Gurez without saying goodbye.'

Hyatt was a kind middle-aged man wearing a lopsided moustache that merged into his short henna tinted beard and decorated his sun-burnt high cheekbones and in a way he was relating the story to forewarn me, so I quickly forgave him for impertinence to relate innuendo against a colleague.

My outpatient attendance grew rapidly. They saw hope in a young enterprising doctor who may have acquired science and knowledge that will be groundbreaking and alleviate pain and misery of disease. Once I had dealt with routine illnesses like infections, digestive disorders

and established chronic conditions, I have gone through 90% of the total workload. It was my in-depth search that I made a breakthrough in uncovering a hidden epidemic.

'This is my wife. She is the third because two others died soon after they bore a child.'

Some of them answered with great anguish in their voice.

'My other wives were fine till they were pregnant and having a baby. They started getting sweating and fever at night and coughing blood. They died before the baby was born.'

I knew instantly that some killer diseases were at work here. I took my investigations to mass enquiry into the villages and the symptoms like coughing up blood and emaciation that were described pointed to tuberculosis. Pregnancy would flare up the infection and kill them. That is why so many women died. Gurez was an isolated region and people made occasional contact with strangers. Few people ever saw the civilized parts over the other side of the mountains.

Run away pony

It was my private practice errand and second trip to Tulail that I found myself in the most embarrassing situation ever. I was offered the best pony for my transport. It was only when I took control of the reins that disaster struck. My feet were dangling in the air and not engaged in stirrups. The pony took off with no

warning. A small animal it sped like a whirlwind, and as a reflex action I lowered my feet on the ground and as I touched the ground with my feet to apply breaks and stood for a second the puny pony slipped off from underneath me! Leaving me standing with my legs apart like a clown. The loud laughter in the crowd was no match to the sight of my red face and racing pulse.

In order to defy ridicule and prove my bravado, I gave the pony chase and having caught up with the animal, I could just about grab his tail. A spectacle aggravated by my inept and impetuous action I managed to pull at the tail and halt the run-away bastard; still, there I was the most respectable doctor of the region tugging at the tail of a miserable pony and a crowd of people running to rescue me, the pony and my reputation. The pony was retrieved and held down after a reprimand by lashes and I set off in some spoilt splendor.

The hazard of the ridge looking down on the river my head reeled. The road was a path just enough to hold the feet of the pony; and the rest was a steep slope that finished in the gushing stream. What if the pony slips? I dismounted at places and clung to the rock face of the mountain as I walked facing the mountain. My face remained turned away from the steep gorge and the stream and my eyes fixed on the path that sustained my life! I felt I need to cling with my nails dug in the stones to prevent a swoon and a disaster.

It was dreadful at sharp turns when I closed my eyes and trusting Almighty God embraced the wall as a took side steps one at a time. I had taken this venture on myself that annoyed me. I could have refused the visit and then I would not be in these tight spots literally. In fact, it was all a fright personal to me of having never experienced a path carved out of a cliff face like this. My companions, the two ponies and my guide were amused at my predicament and walking jauntily both ponies, one still carrying the heavy guide and one light of any load very confidently scaled the path as if in a park.

It was after a good half a mile of this terrifying journey that the path was wide enough to mount the pony again. This short journey imprinted a fear so deep inside me that in my dreams I have relived the experience many times afterwards. What happens if I slip on a stone and I have nothing to cling on to, I sneaked a quick look at the gushing stream below and for a split second lived the experience of free fall on the rocks and a ready companion for the trout waiting in the depths.

I always prided in my ability to swim having scaled twenty-mile stretch without touching an escort boat. It is the fall into a stream in which water was thrown to enormous heights by vertical rocks that was a new challenge for me. The reward I was expecting from the relatives of the patient was very distant in my mind. This was an adventure for real.

After this hair rising ordeal, I finally turned the final corner of the cliff and entered the beautiful valley of Tulail. I have never felt so pleased with myself having come through unscathed and now back to my role as an authoritarian superior human. The total population of about two thousand suddenly appeared from nowhere and led to the interior of the enclave of a mud hut. All smiles in children and wide-eyed elders I was given rapt attention.

I set myself to work like an important professional and finished by making a success of my job. An injection of Aminophyllin had done the trick, and the man was breathing again with wheezing. I was surprised to find myself conducting outpatients. My pony was loaded with bags of local rice and nuts. I was very pleased.

Chapter 9

Amazing phenomenon

Angels serenade

My bedroom window with a view was adjacent to the fields that stretched far away distances. On a normal day, I woke up early morning to the sound of a group of women from the village that walked past my window. Women from the village make this routine trip through the field to fetch firewood from the lower reaches of the forest. They sing in a chorus in the local dialect and when the sounds receded; half asleep, I concentrate in silence to hear the last words.

These groups break dawn up amid trees on hills. I was lucky on occasions to hear them as they pass by my residential quarters. They make conversation with giggles and sing in chorus. The music they generate when they sing folklore far away in the jungle serenades you. The unbroken chorus that fine-tuned by the rustling leaves on trees and standing crops as sound travels down to lower levels in the valleys. I recall some words because I used to be humming verses that were catching. This is my modest construal of the experience. I recall some words I dare translate:

Here is a song we all sing together

Walking through the orchids and the heather

Our melody is life, bliss for ever

Our victuals are air and sounds we hear

From birds that come from far and near

Those descend and delight our hearts so dear

In our souls are joys that grow
 In company with vibes high and low
 Silence we steal from meadows and greens
 Are these memories that trouble our dreams?

These most refreshing voices of singing come echoing through the rustling leaves of the standing crops of Pinga (a type of rice) as they approach the forest and when they return. There is divinity at work here, I mused still in bed and look forward to such a treat to serenade me first thing the next morning and wake me up. It seemed the sounds of nature are in consort with mortal humans. I could not fathom out the lyrics, but I never felt the need to know what they sang. Those days I had no means of recording the sounds so they remained ingrained in my heart instead, very soothing like an anodyne to allay pangs of nostalgia in later life.

The time of the sounds had built in a clock in my mind, and I woke up to it as if by an alarm. This particular morning obsessed with the mysterious singing voices I could not resist the temptation to get out of bed, tear through the fields, and run someplace in the direction of where I can find the ensemble playing the strings of my heart. I was trembling with anticipation and fear.

There were also the stories about wild animals loose in the fields at this still dark hour of the morning. I was in a strange way too excited to be free, alone without constant company of people and felt freedom tapping

at my soul. I managed to grab a branch of the tree to act as my defense to ward off a wandering grisly. I kept walking guided by instinct and the direction of the sounds of singing. It was a good hour of walking my heart started beating fast and sweat appeared on my forehead. It seemed never-ending a journey because the more I ran towards the forest, the more distant it looked and the more receding the voices. I stopped after the best effort to be brave and listened and listened.

There was nothing but wilderness and the singing never seemed to be any nearer. The dense shadow of trees was awesome, hiding the shimmer from the rising sunrays. I have never been scared like this time ever in my life. Here I was alone in the fields with an unlimited view of the crops and a huge curtain of pine forest hanging close over my head. The sounds of singing were my only solace and sign of life. I had to make a decision. Is it the divas of the forest that attract you to be consumed?

Fox Hunt

An extension of my reverie in utopian world I was invited for a fox hunt. I was now getting familiar with favors from people. Some people wished to make friends with me to show off to the village they can rub shoulders with the doctor and on occasions tell them 'Oh yes I will put in a word with the doctor. He is my friend'. The local blacksmith Jabara turned up one

day. He was known for his skills. He made tools for farming, cooking, building and hunting and offered him to everyone who needed them. In return everyone gave him a sack full of grain, a supply of milk, bread and all his needs in living a comfortable life. I recall I was one of his prize clients. He manufactured a gun for me that worked.

This morning one day towards the end of winter he invited me on a trip in the hill opposite to the village where I lived for an opportunity to use my gun for fox hunting. Jabu they called him for short because this tribal name is associated with strong hardy and fearless people. Jabu was my friend now and he prepared me well for the expedition to hunt a fox. I detest killing animals. I eat meat, and I know where it has come from. Albeit I pretend ignorance about the slaughter but never liked to witness slaughtering.

I put my rubber boots on and we set off to the countryside I had never been to before. Jabu started a conversation to make it a friendly jaunt.

'Ever since you drew water from my swollen knee, I knew I owe you something in return. I can walk now. I must show my gratitude.'

It was an unexpected compliment that almost threw me off guard. I said

'Oh yes, I remember your knee. These are routine jobs but Let us only talk about the hunting. What

pleasure do you get in this ghastly pursuit of killing animals?’

He straightened the gun from out of his pharan where it was hiding and said:

‘It is second nature to me and was to my father and his father to hunt ducks and fish and occasionally the jungle goat to feed our family and the village’. Words were coming out nonchalantly he repeated.

‘Hunting was born with Adam. We may not need the skill now but my father was keen on the art and earned a living from game birds, especially the flying duck and wild goat’.

We are now approaching the hill walking on unmarked snow. He said:

‘You will love the sport as once in lifetime experience and want to come again. It is an adventure, Sir’.

I rushed my retort.

‘What about the pain you give the animals?’

At a philosophical level that he would not understand, I added to my riposte that left alone these animals would live a life and not harm you.

‘I have no idea sir’ he said, ending the topic. I seemed to agree. I said

‘Don’t point the nozzle at me. It might go off! I am the only doctor you have about. Who will salvage the bullet from my body?’

After a chuckle and a hard slap on the butt, wooden part of the gun, he handed it to me ceremoniously.

'It is not loaded, and you can only load the gun one bullet a time and it is important to make the kill in the first shot otherwise you have lost the prey or worse at times if you fire at an animal like the snow leopard that makes a visit to our village occasionally, you may be his meal!'

Satisfied with his scary joke, he was admiring his prized gun with a glee apparent in his squinted small eyes. I said vehemently:

'I have not been trained to kill but only save lives. How can you imagine an innocent animal to be a target?'

He ignored my protest and said:

This is yours from now on' He handed me the handmade gun.

'I am overwhelmed and thank you. But who am I supposed to shoot with this?'

I did not wait for an answer. I said

'There is enough killing of people in Kashmir. I will leave that honor with them and stay with 'healing the wounds that come from that shooting if need be.'

I could see the drawn look on his face and make amends;

'Sir, I made this gun with a lot of effort, skill and time. I buy old guns and dismantle them. His one is my special creation. I hope you appreciate it.'

'But I am excited and I will go with you for hunting the fox and maybe fire the gun just once. I will also learn to shoot at targets on trees or the hillside objects that are not living.'

‘That is OK with me’ he said.

We set off aiming for the hills of the far side of the river. It started getting chilly this afternoon in late March but the expedition was on track. We walked five miles up the rock face of the mountain I saw every day through my window. I had warm woolly cardigan and a jacket. My waterproof wellingtons from the cupboard fitted well. We walked uphill an imaginary path till we no longer saw images of the rooftops and the population in the village. We reached the first shelf of the mountain. There was absolute nothingness except bright white snow that only had the limit at the horizon meeting the blue sky sitting like a roof on top of us. There was a perceptible stillness in the air that penetrated my soul. My huntsman companion made a path in the deep snow for me to follow.

It was early dusk and from now on I was not allowed to talk. We arrived at an abandoned hut that is used by nomad shepherds or Gujjars during summertime. Inside the hut, he positioned me on a wooden block with the end of the gun pointing out through a hole in the paneled wall. He carried a sack in which were tools and things but also a bag containing a full chicken still dripping blood. I had a long look at my companion to grapple with my pounding heart that was between excitement and fear. What was this man up to?

‘Doctor Sir, No need to look worried.’ He whispered.

'It is only a small slaughtered chicken with its blood. I will need this to cozen the fox.'

He went out and made a trail of blood from a far away up the hill place to within two hundred yards of our hut and left the carcass there. Now it was time to keep still and breathe gently. I looked out in the stillness of snow spread like a white carpet to the horizon now lit only by its own brightness with a hue of blue light from the half-full moon that shone on it.

'There! It is crawling down the track, you can see' he whispered

'As soon as he settles on his meal, you aim and hold your breath, aim without shaking and pull the trigger'.

I felt like an executioner. I was seized by this horrible thought. The animal has come for his meal, and we tear him apart with a bullet for sport.

I saw the long and slim figure black in color against the white background crawling gently as if it was drawing a line on a palette of a masterpiece. The animal approached the killed chicken for a meal. It settled at its meal. I had never seen a live fox in my life. It looked like a black cat scuttling on snow along the trail and I had never fired a gun either. I did make the kill but only to promise myself to never again fire a gun to kill an animal, because when my guide dragged the prize of my new skill on the snow; it was the sickening mess I had made of a beautiful animal that reviled me.

Jabu skinned the fox and with his excellent skills in taxidermy a few days later I was given the present. I kept the long tail in my room for the time I spent in Gurez if only to remind myself of the troll of hunting that haunted me.

My adventure into the mountains did prove, however, that this hand-made gun that was made by a village blacksmith works. In this isolated part of the world people have no need to flaunt worldly possessions, revel in prejudices or practice political ideologies that discriminate and destroy humanity. They made houses where no nail is used in the construction and the animals living below provide underground heating for the humans living above through harsh winters. Tongue and groove ancient technology put logs of wood together, and mud and hay plastering provides insulation.

The national animal Hangul

Winter was on its last legs and people were celebrating the springtime. The winter they left behind was the harsh experience of being snowed in and confinement. We ventured sitting out to take some sun. We hear a commotion and a blast of automatic gunfire. My staff ran for cover, I withdrew inside and I heard Hyatt running to catch up with me.

'What is the matter?' I asked in a panic. The firing has stopped' Getting his breath back he stuttered.

'Sir, it was only the Hangul. He had strayed on the opposite side of the river. The army came with a big gun and killed the animal. It will be a feast for them. It will last the officers mess for some days'

I stopped Hyatt feeling shocked at the sacrilege of this slaughter. Hangul is the national animal and killing for meat with a blast of fire is not liked.

Temperatures plummet to minus twenties in winter and until recently and before the army arrived in camp here, the prized animal jungle goats locally called *Hangul* roamed the slopes freely in full view of the villager. Hangul has 73 types and needs fresh air for survival. Kashmiri Hangul is peculiar in growing six horns and shedding two every season. It seemed these wild animals knew that the territory was shared in harmony with the people that lived there. The local population had killed the animals only if they found one injured with a broken leg. Apparently, the killed animal is about 200 pounds in weight and feeds a lot of people for many days and the meat is delicious. I was disgusted with the spectacle and for myself was glad for the farm chicken and especially the local lamb. Hangul is one of the many wildlife animals chased by firepower. They have receded into the depths of the Himalayas above the forest line.

Military frontline posts are pitched like dots on mountain plateaus all over, fortifying borders and compromising its beauty. The opposite camps are

within sight of each other seen to be projecting the barrels of machine guns in the direction of the adversary and at times of festivities in peace times the armed men are seen exchanging greeting to each other. There are times they are seen firing shells over the heads of the terrified people interspersed in the firing range.

In these isolated parts of human habitation forsaken by the world community, if mortar shells land on the house decimating it to the ground no one will take notice. In this process of frightful killing, children and the elderly cannot run for their lives. There may be a lot of wailing and crying in grief in the village, but rarely will someone come to commiserate or offer compensation. These are inevitable acts of providence and soon enough their built-in fatalism takes over. The villagers will help to restore the mud and wood house again, and life goes on without those buried or with those maimed for life. At times the total population of village has been forced to gather their lifetime belongings and walk to the other side of the border forever. The empty villages were then used for reinforcements of the military.

The second year of my stint in Gurez was more gratifying because I was a part of the society and well settled. I compromised between riding the high horse of medical ethics and dragging by the scruff the basics of my profession that would bring physical and financial harm to my patients. I was now flexible to

receiving a chicken as a gift for a job done in the hospital at the same time as overlooking a mild transgression by the staff. They would be discreet and not accept walnuts or eggs for favors.

I enjoyed my work and peaked in all parameters of my own health. It was the inadequate facilities in the hospital that was the uppermost challenge. I dreaded surgical emergencies, dreaming about getting an influx of a natural disaster like earthquake, landslides, lightning striking people in the fields or destroying homes. In a way, the valleys were naked and exposed thatched single-storey houses and fields. Nature was kind and peace prevailed.

Medical emergencies would have life-saving treatment in Gurez, a drip, airway and initial medications to make him last the journey across Razdhani. The party of four would take turns in carting the stretcher made from two strong poles and a blanket folded over. In summertime this was an expected event. It was obvious to people that the local doctor was limited with what could be achieved. That is why winters were looked upon with ominous prescience. They greet each other at the end of winter to have come through unscathed.

Bear Bite and Reconstruction of the Face

It was late October time 1960 the Razdhani pass was closed by unexpected early heavy snowfall. This would put on hold transport of patients normally carried by a volunteer stretcher party. It was also the time when

maize crop is ready for harvesting. People look up to the harvest and celebrate the event with open-air stalls of fires on which are cooked the corn on cobs, usually very sweet and tender. It is also the time when the air of temptation is wafted to the higher reaches of the forests and inviting the brown grizzly bear into the fields. Undercover of the dense growth of the crop, the grizzlies furtively descend in the territory to join the festival. One farmer had the misfortune of an encounter with the intruder. I heard the commotion of a large crowd outside the hospital urging me to come out immediately. The man was laid on the table, his face covered with a rag, eyes barely visible. Someone in the crowd shouted:

‘Doctor Sir! I have got his nose. It is horrible! Take it off me.’

Ali rushed out with a kidney tray.

‘Drop it in there’ ordered Ali.

On the palm of his bare hand, the boy produced the remains of the mangled nostrils and white cartilage showing through and threw it in the tray as if it was a live snake.

Where did you find it? Chuckled Ali; He rushed his reply, unsure if he did the right thing.

‘I ran towards the commotion shouting and pelting stones at the animal, I noticed blood on the grass and sitting in this puddle was this piece. I think it was his

nose Ali shoved him out with a gesture. 'Go and wash your hands, in the stream.'

I resumed my examination of the patient. His face was covered with iodine gauze and Ali was cleaning the blood running down his neck. A drip was already set up by other staff. I put gloves on, Jana the midwife was ready with a kidney tray and instruments. I secured two bleeders and covered his mauled face again.

I must take control, I said to myself and show I am confident to deal with the situation. The normal course would have been to cover every wound, inject antibiotic and sedation and prepare the stretcher party for the 40-mile long journey to the other side of Razdhani. That was not possible because of early heavy snowfall.

I was obliged to manage the crisis and take charge of whatever could be done. I looked at the kidney tray with my smile hidden under the mask but deriving subtle humor I allowed myself the snide thought that whatever the victim had suffered at the hands of the grizzly, he had performed an act of catharsis for him. All the sins he had accumulated during his life were washed down the stream. His nose was clean now, and it was a matter of planting it back on his face. That small detail was left to me. The public outside were amazed to find a human organ on show, I ordered it to be deposited at once in the kidney tray and I also ordered the public to leave the room.

So here I was in this isolated part of the planet earth on my own confronted with a man who lost his nose in his fight with a grizzly bear and his upper jaw bone lay bare. I had no experience of organ transplant, and in my short experience I had never seen a man with his nose ripped off. I was impatiently waiting for all to leave and having given the patient sedation and set up IV dextrose to combat shock, I covered the Frankenstein face with gauze soaked in hibitain. My curiosity got the better of me and asked to inspect the nose in the dish. It seemed all my hopes were resting in the kidney dish.

'Let me spread the remains of the nose on drapes'. I ordered the assistant.

'Yes Sir. It hardly looks like a nose. I think the better part of the organ will be in the stomach of the grizzly.'

Ali was my first assistant surgeon transplanting a severed nose. I wanted to humble his part in this drama, so I can be seen to be in charge. I replied.

'Don't talk rubbish. Grizzlies are vegetarian. They only don't like human faces and dig in long nails to maul it beyond recognition.' Ali responded.

'Or they show affection for the human! You know the bear hug?'

I took no notice of the humor in Ali's remark and got engrossed in teasing together the frayed edges of the

nose in the dish. The overhanging light was feeble so I asked for a lantern to supplement light. Everyone was doing something and to my surprise I saw my brother Hamid enter the door holding the lantern. He was visiting Gurez, and braves enough to stand there without flinching to show disgust or emotion and held the extra-light that helped. It was an intriguing experience.

Having deliberated long in agonizing moments, I made a decision. This nose in the dish was not viable. It could not be reconstituted and would not survive as a free graft. Ali agreed with me. It was important he did because he was the only witness and the relatives outside would not claim the nose and repeat the grizzly assault on me. The word was passed to the crowd outside that the remains are a dead part of the patient and if they wish they could take it home and give it an advance burial to join with its owner as and when?

After sedation and a drip in place, I dared uncover the full face to assess the extent of injuries. After a good clean with hydrogen peroxide examination, it revealed deep cuts to the face and eyelids, and two holes over the top of the mangled upper lip bellowing out air from his lungs. Parts of the upper teeth and bone were visible under the nostril holes. I injected local anesthetic and began the two-hour sewing up the ordeal. I was pleased with how the face was taking shape. All but the two holes in the middle were steering at me, huffing and puffing at my ignorance

about what to do with them! I decided to take a break, covered the face with gauze and left the room for tea in my room. I had a sneaky look at the crowd camped in the hospital compound. They even had the audacity to bring a Shisha for the old man who was the grandfather of the victim waiting to see if he will still recognize his grandson.

I was now sipping my tea and frantically turning over the pages of *Belly & Love* the only literature I had on me for advice. What would I do with the defect in the face? His own nose was history now. It was so badly mangled that even to graft it back on would be impossible because the edges were frayed and stitches would cut through. No one expected to find the same face again but a man alive and breathing with whatever nose we planted on him would be accepted. Men in Gurez did not get married on the basis of their looks. It was more like how many sheep he owned? That prior information was no consolation for me. This book I was reading is the bible for trainee medics, but plastic surgery is a specialist discipline that has books I had never even seen in my training days. I did come across a piece that made a decision for me. A new nose had to be crafted. Under local anesthetic, I fashioned a long tube of skin from his left upper shoulder. He was right-handed and would need to use that arm for essential jobs.

One end of the tube still attached to the shoulder, I covered the two nostrils over with the other end and

stitched it around the raw edges. This is a standard tube graft and survives on its own blood supply. Looking like an elephant with the tusk attached to his face, he would be looking after his face for four months to allow everything to heal. I discussed the procedure with the father and two witnessed and my staff and embarked on the procedure.

One more vital information was that cartilages can be moved from place to place as *free graft*, I needed a piece to wedge in as a central prop between the nostril holes to pitch the skin flap up like a tent. His upper lip was sutured to the flap leaving two holes as nostrils and permitting two pieces of rubber catheter for breathing I went for his ear lobe. There were compromises done to the beauty of his face; one more assault would not matter. Half an inch of an elliptical piece of the gristle excised and sutured inside the skin flap. That is as far as I did. The patient was up and about covering his face with a scarf. His wounds healed and the elephant nose was working still attached to his shoulder.

It was late March of 1961; I was posted in the main city that I had the chance of my life to see the man in the main hospital having the third stage of the reconstruction done. I had no photographs. I had no idea how the man looked before the animal defaced him.

I later learnt that his case history was published as an article with a series of photographs. My name did not

feature anywhere. I was downhearted. My seniors were involved in this copyright wrong but theirs was the finished job so I was hushed. My satisfaction came when I saw the man and his grateful words. For me an anticlimax like what always happens my name did not appear in the paper, all the laurels were owned by those who finished the job but one who had laid the foundations of the miracle project under the sanctuary of the highest mountains on earth with the sky as the roof to witness remained anonymous and had no mention anywhere. It happens to all of us, the surgeon fraternity performing many thousands of operations but hardly ever receiving the thrill of a hero in the public eye.

Chapter 10

The Nation

People of Gurez

People of Gurez have a distinct identity. They get better by what you say to them than what you give them in medications. They believe in you over time and allay their suffering by council and advice. You may not agree with me if you have just been visiting Gurez because my impressions of people go back to the early sixties during the tenure of my service. I only saw their good nature and have no memory of their vicious side. They were inherently social. They stopped each other on the wayside; make conversation and humor, and laugh and depart.

A theme of altruism runs across the society, and everyone is eager to give and eager to receive with grace. Most people knew each other and Islam was a binding feature in the mosque and outside. Special days and festivals were celebrated in communal prayers. The population by and large as I saw them was product of their own lineage with deep cultural traits. The only segments of the population that are outsiders were the government employees like me. In contrast with metropolitan cities where a constant flow of outsiders make a home and evolve a hybrid population, Gurez culture was home-grown. Dards, as they are called, have singularities that show in their

simplicity and physical features. They speak Sheena and Kashmiri with a soft and warm accent. Men wore long robes down to ankles and on warm days find no reason to wear trousers or underwear disclosing their facile nature. Underclothes are a luxury. One characteristic common to females is their slender bodies that defy their age. I did not find obesity a problem. They are engaged in heavy-duty jobs like carting animal feeds and firewood while the males are at home knitting blankets, jumpers and socks in their famous local design known all over as Cham Bulbul.

The women make the journey to far away jungles with baskets on their heads to collect fallen driftwood from the forest. That is the only source of energy they can rely upon to cook and keep warm. Twigs bearing resin lit at night provide the light source, dry leaves make charcoal used in fire pot baskets or *Kangri*, as mobile heating hidden under clothes. Bigger branches of wood are used in earthenware cooking range to cook meals. Like formations of birds in the sky, they work in groups.

Younger women are petite as I said and whatever rags they wear suite them. Older women wear Khoi an embroidered felt skullcap. The headscarf was Cotton or local wool spun and woven into material used to sew clothes. It defies logic why this wrinkled tunic that drapes these creatures adores their silhouette so well. These outfits look like a work by some famous designer that could win laurels at the catwalk in a

fashion show. The wrinkled tunic would not require ironing, a process that did not capture their imagination.

Winters are very harsh, and clothes to snuggle in have a built-in loose finish that traps heat. Girls working outside have disheveled hair with half-finished plats that hide their faces, unaware how with a few strands of hair they cover their piercing dark eyes, limiting their field of vision. In an unconscious effort, they shake their head and strands of offending hair. The homes where they sleep and keep warm have no mirrors on walls to see or a wardrobe for clothes. Every item of clothing hung on pegs piled up alongside men's and the female members.

At its lowest point, Gurez is above eight thousand feet altitude. The skin of visitors soon gets weather-beaten and tanned. The unfiltered ultraviolet and ultra-clean air clear of dust predisposes sunburn. However, the extraordinary experience to see in full moonlight is glaring pale faces as if to emulate celestial galaxies and integrate as part of nature.

Gurez communities live in groups not only as families but in larger communal hamlets. One striking example that exemplifies the life they live in the ways they come out at times of emergencies partake in facing new challenges to access roads, water and food supplies or illness. Homes are wooden structures and liable to get gutted in fires. In the event of a fire, the affected family

is taken to safety and the rescue implemented by villagers. The house is reconstructed to full potential in days by the total village effort. Trained carpenters and masons get to work, and others work as labor. Logs of wood come from the forest, and Tung and Groove method used the house is built in days.

Nature is a partner with people in this paradise. The most striking feature is egalitarian share of beauty shining sunshine and bloom of raw freshness on all hidden places big and small and all habitation in its fold. I was now becoming a part of this masterpiece of nature and its radiant brilliance.

Civilizations change the landscape. Today life in Gurez has been transformed by inept interference of habitat by the modernity of cultural singularities. Misfortune descends on them unwittingly in the name of progress and emancipation. I was a witness to the changes in their traditional way of lifestyle and the havoc wreaked on their health by inept incursions. It was politics with its ugliest face. My sensibility was numbed when I learnt about vulnerable people and their innocence exploited by outside cruel people and depredation of the natural environment carried out in a systematic manner.

In my narrative further on I will give you some more details but as a case in point the constant contact of outsiders with residents for long periods of time brought diseases that caught them as virgin soil and

created havoc. Pollution caught them off guard when mechanized transport was introduced. They spent their lives walking and trekking as a means of travel so vital for their longevity. They were so naive that the first time a jeep entered the valley; children grabbed sheaves of silage as fodder and placed it before the vehicle to eat. It was a custom when people arrived after a long absence the first welcome was given to the tired horses to feed them.

They make socks, long shawls and sweaters to stock up for harsh winters. Gurez lamb is not only the provider of the tastiest meat on earth, but the wool is remarkable for its soft touch and warmth. The men are so laid back that they forget to wear trousers and let *pharons* (long woolen dress) cover their legs. There are no siren sounding emergency services in any form of vehicles, but I often wondered what if they do need to run for cover if natural disasters like lightning strike. They will have to take their pharons off to run. That would leave them exposed to a flashing spectacle that may not be alarming if the whole village is on the run in a panic and everyone is dressed niggardly. It is possible India and Pakistan open one more round of shelling each other and bombs drop within sight. How will they run with a long robe and no trousers? I put this question to an elderly man from Dower village where the hospital is based. I wish I had not asked?

‘You people from the city think we are a liability on humanity and useless. You want to know what we are capable of doing?’

In a second he took his Pharon off and revealed his skinny body but essentials covered with makeshift panties made from knitted wool. He took a sprint like a tiger, a medical miracle for his age. I was preparing for a medical emergency to watch him in amazement. This crazy old man with only a flimsy cloth around his essentials was dashing to demonstrate his strength to me. He made the point. I said aloud:

‘Careful, you will make work for me. I am glad you are tough, and after this sprite you tell me your heart is in good health.’

My stethoscope was to hand, and I expected a functional systolic murmur. He was normal and his pulse rate little over 110.

Gurazians express in a language peculiar to them their day to day caricatures, humor and silent comedy. The language spoken is a hybrid version of at least three spoken languages in and around Kashmir. The result culminates in a dialect that is sweet to hear, resonates with the ambience of nature and full of harmony that blends in with the environment. Sheena is the dominant language spoken along with Dardi and Kashmiri.

It would not be possible to translate the actual tickle in the comic story, but even to decipher the semantics is a hilarious experience. Translations can be funny.

The men do come to life when someone in the community needs to build a house. It is a project in which all men take part and make no charge. Money as cash is scarce. All commodities and services are purchased on a barter system. Tradesmen are self-trained, and grain is the currency used to buy or sell. They offer to bring logs of wood, shape and chop them to use tongue and groove technology and erect the house in days. A thatched roof and mud plaster mixed in hay complete the construction. No nails are used in

the construction and wooden hinges are crafted on which to hang doors and windows. The carpenters craft pegs and make appropriate holes that bind the structure together.

I was convinced that this exquisite design of paradise on earth is hosting Gods beautiful people. They have an ethereal feel, and that is why I have the scales of the seven deadly sins enunciated by the desert in mind hermit, to describe this society. Take the sin of envy so common in the real world we live in when we want what others have for ourselves and disparage those who have. People get angry about their own failings of not being achievers and despise those who have, bloodshed and battles ensue. It all seems all ownership is of collective nature and everyone has everything and individuals are happy to share.

A marriage is a cherished event and the couples become a responsibility of the community. If a house needs to be built for the new couple everyone will muck in to lay the foundation. The effort is pooled, raw materials are the timber from the woods, and clay and grass for plastering are retrieved from the fields. The construction work is spontaneous and jobs allocated to people who have trained themselves to each discipline. No nails are used anywhere. The tongue and groove technology used makes wooden huts with windows and doors, a room for the cows that keeps the rooms above warm for the family.

Diseases of high civilization were unknown. It was a quintessential virgin soil for all sins of humanity. That is why *as shall* see how peoples' lives were devastated when *contact* with outside people was made or forced upon *them*. I will take a while in paraphrasing the story of *lives* led in this part of the world when emancipation and enlightenment had peaked everywhere else, including the freed nation of India.

Modernity in this nation crept in like a contagion in an epidemic with the seven great sins thrust upon that society. Greed motivated by an influx on money, gluttony, lust, avarice, sleuth, wrath and pride. Translated in the lives of the people, it was rare to face lifestyle diseases because it would be a far cry for a man to overindulge in eating because the choice of foods was limited, apart from the rare appearance of the jungle goat killed for meat if the animal had broken a leg and was sacrificed for meat that was distributed to the far reaches of the community.

Nature was on their side because the local lamb reared on the grass from the mountains was so delicious it could be eaten raw. I had my share and vouched it was the most delectable meat I have ever tasted. In one of the spare rooms of the hospital, a lamb carcass was hanging like an icicle covered over with a thick layer of ice. When the ice was hacked off the portion of meat made a meal unmatched by anything like I have experienced since. Potatoes in Gurez were a breed singular to this area and had a delicious sweet taste.

The people lived lives like a flock of birds so that the word privacy was a taboo in social circles. In the event lust, greed, envy or thieving instincts overcame someone the world about them would know. Crimes and virtues peep through the close-knit society without inviting the eventual consequences to come as a surprise. The culprits are ostracized. The local police look for work because it is the only crime that will pay those rewards.

Similarly, no one would have the chance to be evasive in the chores expected from them because work that needed to be done was every bodies business and found its place in individuals. Men did less in physical jobs than women except in communal construction works and spent their time at home knitting woolen blankets, socks and jumpers in a design Chashmi Bulbul this region is known for. The design is named for emulating the eyes of a bird nightingale much like an almond. Using wooden thick knitting needles they make long socks and jumpers. Men wear long robes called *pharons* that covered their legs. Trousers were a luxury.

The winters are harsh. The snow covers most of their houses. They remain indoors and live of dried vegetables and what the animals give them in milk and warmth. Springtime comes with renewed life for one more year ahead. The elderly peep out of their little windows and congratulate each other. 'How did the

winter go?' 'Fine' was the reply. 'I used to look at your chimney. I saw the smoke and thank God'. Now was the time to bring spades and shovels out and start living again.

Infrastructure

There are no roads as the civilized world knows them and consequently, motorways do not enter their vocabulary in Gurez. A cart road perhaps or even a dirt track is all they have for transport. Horses and ponies make their own highway code and traffic rules do not pose any threat to humans or animals. This has useful consequences for the medical staff because with threadbare facilities, there was no way the hospital could cope with high-speed accidents. Roads bring vehicular traffic with stress, clutter, noise and pollution that tells upon the health of people and can be extremely demanding of medical resources. A ruptured spleen from a speeding traffic accident, for example, will be fatal if not operated immediately. Facilities for such procedures were a dream those days in the mountains of Kashmir even though modern equipment installed now makes headlines.

Similarly, severe trauma that resulted from a fall in the mountains would end fatally. Fortunately, such casualties are rare, albeit accidents from falls from a running horse or a skid from a steep slope may end up serious with internal injuries. Gurez has its own share of disasters like avalanches that kill people and unwary contact with wild animals that take a toll on human life.

The locals believe animals perceive humans as an encroachment on their terrain in upper reaches.

In the literary domain, there was always a sense of anxiety that the place is losing its singularities by contagion from outsiders and modernity. Communities that live in these parts did not make their lifestyle abounding with a flourish when enlightenment introduced changed lives. An occasional young man made it to Kashmir cities for higher studies, and they ended up clerks in local offices. They believed in the barter system in day to day transactions. Cash empowered them to look for worldly goods and their women were introduced to feminine frailty in the fashion domain. A few ended up as victims of avarice and capitalist mindset.

Is Gurez, the symphony of peace and tranquility maintained with minimal intervention from governance? The water supply comes directly from the fast-flowing river bringing melted ice and glaciers. Electricity is a dream and people made do with diesel generators. The power generated from the local river is exported out to national grid in India.

Where will you find peace and tranquility combined to make a place of seventh heaven for you? It was a sacrilege to sleep through the moments that break the dawn from yonder the hills covered by a deep green wall of trees. You look out at the sharp line across the horizon, broken up only by the steep gorge that divides

the range of mountains. The growth of the coniferous forest is laid like a wall so that you cannot see the wood for the trees. Early morning sun glints as the rays forcing through the leaves sparkle, and gradually the rays are seen invading the carpet of the corn and Ping, the local version of rice. The gentle breeze that sways the crops in one direction and then in another makes patterns in the collage of the landscape in such quick sequence that the formations and silent music it creates synchronize with your own heartbeats. The air is fresh and crisp so that you could open your mouth wide to breathe and never feel you had enough. It enlightened the soul.

Nation personified

People of Gurez were exploited and despoiled with political incursions. Politics also breached the boundaries of this celestial paradise. As I write now bastions of State administration talk about bringing reinforced concrete to build tourist accommodation and start adventure tourism. More roads and traffic will result in pollution. This is a place where not a particle of dust was seen. They live by using basic amenities of living. In their simple ways, they manage to be happy. If they did not have access to modern medicines to cure their ills, they were happy to use local remedies from the herbs in the forest. Complications and side effects related to local remedies are well known. A rich supply of jungle herbs was available without the need of a chemist and a cure of everyday ailments was known. Anxiety levels being

low the stress-related diseases were few, and the high threshold of pain from an illness or trauma made it easily amenable to be curable by a local herb. A walk through the foothills and forest was delightful with an aroma from wildflowers that stroked senses, bracing energy.

Like all indigenous people in the world, people of Gurez live with organic habits incorporating constituents of nature faithfully abiding by the laws laid down for them from ancient times. While the jungle goats or Hangul as they called these exotic animals locally roamed the dense jungle in the periphery, the people also roamed freely the mountains, slopes and meadows. Hangul is the national animal of Kashmir, albeit people do make a feast with the meat, the most delectable of all. One goat will feed the whole village.

Nature was home to people, that nurtured them, that provided for them that looked after them when they were physically in need of help. The plants and herbs in the forest were a source of the medicines for animals as well. Food was abundant from the fields. Village population lives in a commune. The share resources and skills for trades. The village Ironsmith may be given a bag of local rice for a farming implement he made for them. I was treated as a part of the commune as the only doctor for them and they rewarded me for out of hours services with a sack of nuts or if it were a big fee they would give a live chicken.

In this environment of barter system sight of money was a rare curiosity. All was going well for the people until the monsters of civilization violated their confines and the armies arrived and started spraying mortar shells against each other, despoiling this Gods commune and their beautiful hilltops. Their lands were split apart and the armies bedded in leaving innocent natives concertinaed between machine guns. As occupied lands the resident armies gave them pain, disease and death. Not only were diseases like tuberculosis, deadly viruses, and spirochete infections introduced but also the ruin and corruption that money in the form of currency notes brings.

A nation acquires international personality when its people and their territory live as one. Gurez people resist dissociation from their root and land that harbors its indigenous sect of population. Gurez with Sheena foundation kept its native characters that dominate external influences. Taking a long view at the history there have been many incursions from invaders from as far back as Alexandra, Abdalli and Mahmud Ghazni from Afghanistan, Zulfi Khan Brother of Ghangis Khan from Mongolia, invaders from Tibet and Moguls from India. Saints from Persia brought art and culture that became integral through to the progeny. They all left their mark and their seed so that the hybrid population became characterized by traditions and looks that passed down as a tribe singular to them. In the millennium of proselytizing their identity, they acquired veritable bondage of cultural anthropology.

Nowadays when people from Kashmir travel abroad they are mistaken for Greeks, Central Asian and Eastern European by the color of skin, eyes and construction of facial features. Whatever else the invaders did in plundering the impoverished masses; a significant portion of men married locally and abandoned their home and stayed back. Foreign invasions left remarkable influence on looks, literature and handicrafts that have become embedded in the fabric of the organic society.

Cultural uniqueness and the languages spoken have a hybrid character and over the ages spawned from Tibeto-Mongolian, Persian and Sanskrit languages spoken by Buddhists and Brahmins that made their home in Kashmir. All these virtues conflated to make some of the most admirable human beings on Earth. Kashmir across Northern areas took a distinct identity. People of Gurez were archetypal of this society. The women have that luster of pale angelic polish on their sculpted faces that it was hard to tell if painted artwork has not come alive. The only dark cloud that lurks over them is poverty and overwhelming security umbrella that has besieged their environs. It is their simplicity in style and demure habits that are striking. They speak in low voice and their speech is graduated to a fine tune.

Gurez was a pathway for travelers to central Asia and as peripatetic sections of population left their mark all over. As a rule they are demure, affable and up-beat. Women in these parts are the workhorses of the family. In defiance of the laws of nature, the roles are reversed and it is women that chop the wood in the jungle and carry heavy loads from the fields. They also use stone grinders for husking the crop and desiccating vegetables for the winters. Men, on the other hand are seen ambling round in oversize garments and knitting with large wooden needles.

Chapter 11

Ascetics of Gurez

Saints with exceptional attributes of holiness

Overlooking gateway to Gurez on the hills of Bandipore in Chapal Pahari is a remarkable shrine. What may have been assumed as Moses landmark there exists the shrine of Baba Dawood Khaki (1521 - 1585 AD). His legacy is outstanding. He wrote books in Persian and his devotional exercises are well known.

It may be the ambience of serenity will infuse self-denial or abstinence from sensual desires, or they come to Gurez to merge their inherent ascetic doctrine; the result is a haven for believers. You may be an agnostic, but you have to trust history to tell you that spirituality changed Kashmir and Gurez completely like the globe is turning round. The people proselytized, the culture took a flight, languages were redefined, and spiritual emancipation came shinning. Aloof and protected Gurez was unscathed by the knock-on effect of crime and modernity as we understand it. Recent times have seen changes in behavior brought in by incursions from outsiders. Islam runs across all parts and beyond, even though history reveals the strong presence of Buddhism and Brahmanism in the past years. We will take a glimpse of the most dominant personality that made eternal landmarks in the history of Kashmir and Gurez.

Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani (1314 - 1384) was a Persian Sufi of the Kubrawiya order, a poet and a prominent Muslim scholar. He was born in Hamadan, Iran. His

mausoleum stands in Khatlan province of Tajikistan. He is known as Shāh-e-Hamadān, Amīr-i Kabīr Ali Sani. His shrine named *Khankah* stands proud as an icon alongside river Jhelum in the heart of the city of Srinagar. My birthplace house looked across the river Jhelum at the shrine, and all members of my family were devotees.

Muslims as well as Hindus throng the place for worship. His contribution to Kashmir is exemplary. His name as Ali Sani gave him the title of lineage as the younger Hazrat Ali (RU). He contributed the knowledge on subjects like ethics, science, philosophy, jurisprudence, theology, poetry and proses immensely and spread all across the valleys of Kashmir. He also profoundly impacted the architecture in Kashmir through the construction of Khanqahas and tombs. His arrival and influx of teaching the Shah-i Hamadan (R.A.) brought a socio-cultural and religious revolution. He was an author and a poet par excellence and wrote books like, *Zakhiratul Muluk and Muwwadatul Quraba*. *Zakhiratul Muluk* dealt with his political ideology, the duties of rulers and the responsibilities of the people. The political concept of rights and duties was born. He was the author of many other publications covering subjects on religions and spiritual aspects involving humanity.

He settled and started educational and research institutions in Khatlan province of Tajikistan and came to Kashmir valley three times. He and his associates

tirelessly engaged in preaching Islam, arts and crafts. He was accompanied by about seven hundred preachers, known as "Sadaats". Of these seven hundred people, seven settled in Gurez. One famous ascetic was Baba Abdur Razaq Shah and Baba Dervaish whose shrines are located near the hamlet of Fakirpora. Shahi Hamadan was buried in Khatlan in Tajikistan Central Asia in 1384 AD. The shrines of other saints are located at Chorwan, Bagtore, and Dangital Tulail across the Neelam River, and at Kamri in Dood-Gagi village in Azad Kashmir.

UNESCO decided to celebrate 2015 as 700th birth anniversary of Mir Syed Hamadani (R). A seminar was held on the theme '*Mir Syed Hamadani A scientist and Thinker*' in Dushambe (Tajikistan) on Sept 5, 6, 2015. A great spiritual and cultural bondage is exhibited between Kashmir and Tajikistan through his teachings. The work of the preachers is commendable. They used their power of recitations, taught handicraft for which Kashmir is recognized in the world. People converted to the Islamic faith in very large numbers.

Gurez and its ambience attract artists, saints, hermits and Sufi's who seek solitude in a cave and pray. More recently Peer Baba came from Multan (Pakistan) in 1933 and established himself in a cave at Durmat, north of Kanzalwan. He was about 35 years old. He is said to have fasted for months without taking any food or water. On occasion, he came down to Kanzalwan and spoke to people in Urdu and Farsi.

The local people revered him and would feed him. He was hard of hearing, spoke very little and was popularly known as "Nanga Baba". In Feb 1940, he came down from Durmat to Rajdhan during a heavy (massive) snowstorm and subsequently died. When the locals tried to bring the Baba's body to Bandipore for burial, they were attacked by a large number of honeybees, and he was instead buried close to Razdhani Pass.

Evidence of Buddhism and Brahmanism as the organic religions is found in archaeological surveys in valleys north of Gurez uncovered with hundreds of carved inscriptions in Karoshthi, Brahmi, and Tibetan where the early history of Buddhism is revealed.

Faith Healers

Faith healers were famous because prayer was the first call when an ailment would show. People believed most illnesses stem as reprimands from divinity and causes related to nature that would have a natural end if self-limiting. On the other hand, nature cured it or left with a disability that would easily be ascribed to a good deed or sin committed during his or her life or an evil from the immediate ascendants or descendents. The healers' touch and sermon would assuage the pain or anxiety the immediate concern of the patient or the family. The incidence of lifestyle diseases like adult diabetes, high blood pressure or gout was minimal. Indulgence in eating and alcohol in any form was unknown. There were no excessive rich foods to make

people obese. Looming as a dark cloud was the cruel incursion of imported diseases. Fortunately, antibiotic resistance was not a problem as yet. Ascetics had upper hand.

Priest or the Con

Priest of Gurez was an iconic personality and one priest stood out as the topmost figure. He is where my competition was because this priest came only once a year from the metropolitan city of Srinagar and he had more loyal patients than I would hope to get in a decade. The chronic ailing patients with festering medical problems lay in wait for the long-bearded healers from the great city to come along and perform miracles. In that time their maladies would die out, or they themselves would be dead and no questions asked. If they had survived the long illness, the priest laid claim to the success from the remote spiritual powers he used. For that, he had earned a cockerel or even a bigger animal like lamb even before he started his rounds.

Invariably it was months before the snow would melt and an advance party of ponies would cross over the mountains to greet the healer/priest. I witnessed the spectacle when one day I heard a commotion. The priest was passing through heading a procession of followers sat on the back of a donkey half his size. A short and plump figure this little man with a turban twice the size of his head and a beard that touched his

naval got attention and people behind him chanting loud sermons he recited. At the tail end of the parade, a herd of sheep and ponies carrying grain and walnuts is carted. There was no cash in Gurez and all fees and offerings were piled on the animals across villages to reach the other end of mountains. More assets were added reroute as more patients were treated by the holy man.

I felt humbled to learn that the flock was only a part of what the priest was given as his fees for his spiritual and ephemeral favors by the finite temporal people of Gurez. He stopped en-route in villages if a big reward was expected. On occasions, he executed a full-blown procedure like helping childbirth. He is seen digging his heel into the abdomen for colic and produce a stone from urine. I was belittled as I heard these stories because I thought that I was the only torchbearer of medical enlightenment in the region and a visible embodiment of medical science. So; why did I only get bags of walnuts in reward and face humiliating competition by this goat of a man who preached fake healing powers?

I reviled him and prayed that he would start bleeding from his piles profusely sitting on his donkey back and come to me as an emergency for treatment. I would insert the largest proctoscope reserved for cows in his backside and forget to retrieve it for until he screamed! Show him how bleeders can be clipped to save lives. If he screamed with the pain, I would gather the village

crowds to witness his predicament and deride him at his failure to help himself by spiritual or healing power. I had no such luck. He was fed very well balanced a diet to suffer constipation and piles.

I must confess the preacher had skills like forceful gimmickry that cured psychosomatic ailments. He even indulged in sessions of séance and communicated with their elders who passed away. His special field was excommunicating the possessed. A case history revealed to me by my cook Hyatt was about the youth possessed by a demon.

A story that made the news

Hyatt leaned forward and said.

'The evil spirit came at night and made the boy jump and scream in bed'. After a brief pause to recap, he said.

'The priest was called. He immediately started recitation and advised that as a part of treatment a big wooden spoon be laid under the boys' pillow'.

His little sister shared a bed next to him. That night it was the sister who woke up screaming because the boy was hitting her on the head with the wooden spoon chasing her round the room. The victim was rescued and the priest was called for help'.

The story was getting mortifying, and I was tempted to intercede.

'The Priest knew the spoon would be used this way and he will have one more visit paid heavily.'

Hyatt carried on with the story with a subdued smirk:

'Yes, it has worked for the priest! He came in to examine the girl shuffling his long beard with both hands and pushing past people to examine the injuries on the head of the girl. He made a pronouncement'. Hyatt seemed amused.

'The demon has left the boy and entered the body of the girl'. Declared the priest

'Can you all see the signs on the head of the girl where the devil has made the entry?' pointing to a scratch on forehead.

'The terrified sister started protesting in loud sobs that she is not possessed'.

"That is not her voice." proclaimed the priest.

The granny interceded.

"I agree. The demon has changed victims".

The boy seemingly affected by his deeds was the first to recover and it was he, who came to the rescue of his sister. He held her close and owned up to be the one possessed and that he was cured now. The priest was rewarded.

The villagers had to be convinced the priest was the preferred source to recoup from demons of ill health. Preparing for the afterlife was no problem for them because there was no crime in this society and they were always in obedient servitude of the Supreme Almighty. The priest had a persuasive and striking art in communication skills.

One day not far in history, it is known a large crowd was assembled in the field on a dark night to chant. The priest was choreographing verses in Arabic (not intelligible to common masses) that got louder and louder and louder till he screamed the loudest:

‘Behold! There they are! The angels are here!’
Miracle!

He has a small torch hidden under his long robe that was turned on furtively and shone light as the priest danced round and round in the open dark field, making circles of glimmer from under his garment. The entire crowd was under a spell. Some fell unconscious in the field in a trance. Next day a huge herd of sheep was his reward for having a spiritual visitation. People touched his hands and even his robe in which he had hidden the torch.

You turn over the pages of this work of art crafted by Him with His Own Hands and lament over the way it has been despoiled with adverse human intervention. Foothills and ravines in between are inundated with hideous camps spread out like vulture foraging on a prey; villages have been partitioned by convoluted barbed wire preventing people in the village to communicate with each other. They are allowed to talk across the wire barrier once a week under the supervision of the army posted across the valleys to defend Indian positions against those parts held by Pakistan. A portion of the good-natured and simple

population on this planet mired in the sinews of harsh militarism.

Environment

A lifetime of animated living in consort with nature, the locals see the onslaught as an anticlimax and their spirits caved in.

In the initial stages, the army had a contingent of local people as soldiers and officers of lower ranks. People were getting acclimatized to their presence and like any indigenous peoples in the world did not take kindly to the change of the ambient environment. They not only came into contact with vagaries of civilization that changed their lives but also became victims of disease and greed. In this Devine community money was in physical terms only a word of honor and barter commodities.

The stock exchange was controlled by the village heads and altruistic favors were always built in the fiscal management. Currency notes and coins were uncommon. This was the first evil introduced by the army. Young men the first victims were seen travelling to civilization yonder mountain passes, and were tempted to buy gadgets like radios and toothbrushes. The time tested method of using willow branches chewed ends as cleaning devices for teeth fell in disrepute as old fashioned even though the resin from the willow has proven qualities.

The more harsh treatments were meted out if on occasions, there was a call for a show of rebellion or

insurrection. Havoc and despair were wreaked in the total society.

People of Gurez were promised peace and security with many thousands of troops stationed all along the foothills but all they ever got was harsh treatment and abuse. The population found themselves transformed from happy farmers into subservience of the powers, catering to their needs in services, food supplies and labor.

In the confines limited by mountains on all sides, all the available space is accounted for. The valleys contained just enough fields for crops and grazing animals. The jungle was on the verge of the fields and shielded wildlife. Forces encroached on all forms of habitat for humans and animals on both sides. This indigenous life has remained incarcerated and substituted by ever-expanding forces establishments.

I was sat out offering medical advice to patients that came for follow up and would not mind if they were consulting the doctor in the open-air hospital garden. As the dusk approached and the chill started biting, the smell of half-burnt meat on charcoal fire came wafting in from yonder the foothills. That part of Gurez is out of bounds for all civilians. The army campus is another world to the locals. Having noticed my consternation at the smell Hayat spoke out of turn and over the head of the old man sitting in the chair in front of me.

"Sir, it is small from the same Hangul they killed a week ago and it is the carcass remains on skewers being barbecued. There will be enough for the rest of the month. Even the bare bones are loaded on the revolving spit and half-burnt." Feeling disgusted, I interrupted.

"They must be hungry. They eat leftover old bones. They leave nothing for the stray dogs to eat?"

'It is a spectacle that reminds you of the national geographic channel and the strident scenes of the big cats set on a prey. It is absolutely revolting and I forbid you to ever repeat the story. We ended the conversation in a somber reflective mood and cheered up when the local friend Din arrived.

It seemed the mountain cabinet is useless when the uniformed populations run amok. One incident that haunts me is when I witnessed a team of soldiers throw a grenade in the stream and the hideous grin on their faces as they saw the rainbow trout fish surface with white shinning bellies up, little ones and large all dead. These are small sacrifices made to serve the wide interests of national security. The few times open wars were raging the whole region is thrown into a maelstrom and havoc is wreaked.

The benefits of a resident army are also perceptible for the financial help to the locals and company to the local civil society like me! One day, I went over to the police station for an afternoon recreation with my

friend big Khan. I was getting lessons for shooting practice with the 303 rifle gun. Apart from the fantastic trekking, hunting, trout fishing sports Gurez was like an unending holiday paradise, I now wanted to try my hand at shooting with real guns. 303 was the ultimate assault weapon the local government could use and only police could stock one.

My friend big Khan was always keen on doing something to oblige me and please me. He opened the door to his armor and pulled a gun out. He gave me a quick lesson on the working mechanics of his killing machine. He put live bullets in its magazine and at a far distance put an object on a tree as my target. I fired at this target a mile away. The sound created a commotion not in my right shoulder but reverberating in the valleys and rebounding sounds from the mountains are remarkable. There was a protest from the resident military. When the sound reverberated in the valley, it was announced that our country was under attack and started a military alert.

The total network of soldiers on duty stood on edge ready for action. The trenches in the hilltops had a wireless message to be ready for orders to open fire for combat. Machine gun cannons were now pointing in the direction of the enemy. It was the enemy or Pakistan army on attack. The Colonel acting as the local supreme commander made an instant fortuitous decision and ordered for all action to be suspended

and wait for a repeat of the gunfire. He was informed from all sources that no one was hurt.

Investigation on a war footing uncovered the anticlimax in hyperactivity quite disappointing that it was only the local doctor playing with a police 303 gun. I was summoned to the HQ base that ended in a tough meeting with the colonel. I apologized for my inept adventure that ended amicably and I was treated with a tot of Scotch whisky in the officers' mess, a real treat for anyone in the mountains.

'We are in a border area and firing guns can be alarming' said Colonel Singh, a six-foot two extremely trim and proper middle-aged man who had covered his radiant face with black hair growing from all sides including his nostrils. His gruff voice was also deep and effusive. Like a typical army officer, he did not wait for my comment and continued:

'Your unwary mistake was extremely beneficial to the whole company! Would you believe it?'

I was breathing better for this encouraging observation by the Colonel and knew I was not going to be court marshaled. I muttered:

How come? A snigger and a wave with his left little finger towards his massive camp:

'It was like a fire alarm drill. I found out where we need to update and make changes. It is long time Pakistani's dared to fire at us and we had almost lost our guard. I should thank you.'

I was cordially invited to the officers' mess, a rare privilege for a civilian.

I was amazed at the lifestyle behind the gates of the camp. Top class décor and furniture. In company with officers, I was a part of frolic and fun and luxury of trout fish roasted in the open fire. This is where the hand grenade came handy and fish in abundance. I did manage to swallow. I joked with the colonel:

'I stirred a commotion firing that gun. Did I disturb your peace?'

A peal of big vulgar laughter ensued between all present and ended by both his big hands pulling at the enormous moustache punctuated by loud pronouncements by the colonel:

'Why do you think we are treating you such lavishly? Your single fire of that gun gave me an opportunity to test the whole battalion's readiness to respond to attack from Pakistan and of all weapons and a look at the artillery stocks. We have already made a long list of equipment and stocks from HQ. I have to thank you again.'

'Small mercy, I suppose; I thank you for sparing me a court marshal!'

A burst of laughter from all present that trickled down to a smirk from the colonel and ended by stiff, painful handshakes. All except me were in uniforms and

seemed to show off their physical strength by squeezing hard in handshakes.

I shook lots of hands amidst courtesies and smiles and made my way home.

I knew there would be financial perks; the officers' mess was laughing with prosperity. I for myself had to be content with half-eaten trout and staggered home with a soldier escort. Walking down the hill I was thinking loud. For a decade now, the lives of local people were subjected to absolute domination by the military and even the soldiers were tormented with boredom. Why not prepare a stage show and bring local people a glimpse of amusement they had never experienced ever in their lives. It would also appeal the thousands of army men in the camp. They will be a good audience and it will be good fun for the locals as well. I set myself organizing it and one plot emerged from a remote corner of my brain.

Din, the supplies man, seemed to be the obvious choice of the hero. Next morning I sent for him and from the very start he was enthused with the project.

'I came with an innovative idea. We will stage a drama and invite the army officers to watch. I will come up with the script'.

We started making arrangements and on the warm evening of 11 April 1959 we staged a play with remarkable success and for the first time in the history of Gurez an entertainment event made possible.

The army agreed to provide the venue and helped to build a stage. There was enough seating for a hundred people but the covered enclosure housed more than three hundred. I prepared the script and used the Urdu language to include the Indian army. The stage was draped with hospital sheets and on the sheet was drawn across the middle of the podium to delineate a room inside with strong lights so that shadows can be seen of any activity in the room.

Staged a play

Local classical folk music on cassette player played while the curtains are drawn. The dark stage lights up and Din walks in. There is clapping from the make shift auditorium because Din is liked by all. He is amusing and lightens the hearts of people when they need cheering up. He likes attention and now was his chance. Dressed in night clothes he put hands out in prayer:

‘Oh my Great God, Please save my wife Shahfu. Why is she facing danger to her life? This is our first child and now her screams are killing me. She is my sweetheart I cannot live without her. Why is she in pain, Oh my God Almighty?’

Din makes the whole audience emotional with his gestures, himself sobbing.

The silhouette of Shahfu lay groaning and whining in a female voice is seen as the light behind the dividing sheet is lit and the shadow of Shahfu can be seen lying down in bed with a great bulging stomach, heaving the bulge up and down. The part was played by a boy who mimicked female cries. Din shows himself going barmy and he managed to bring real tears seen by audience rolling down his cheeks. Din picks up the telephone and makes a plea to the doctor.

'Please doctor, I will give you all I have from life, please come quickly and save my Shahfu.'

In this commotion the doctor makes appearance. He looked like a man wearing white coat and a felt hat made for this occasion and carrying a doctor's bag. This part was played by Gulama my hospital employee. Din pounced on him:

'Doctor Please save Shahfu. She is all I have. She is in pain and the baby is not coming'

Doctor waves him away making himself important.

'I will do the best I can' and departs to enter the room at the back behind the curtain.

Show the shadow of a pregnant woman through the curtain on the stage. It was a man feigning a woman's voice lay on a bed behind the transparent curtain. Heavily pregnant and breathing hard and lifting her stuffed up stomach as she breathed, she would be yelling with pain. In the front of the stage Din volunteered to play the distraught husband expressing almost crying for the predicament his wife is in. She

was in the last stage of very painful labor. The doctor arrives to his great relief all dressed up in white and carrying a bag and disappears inside after debriefing the husband about the patient. You could now see the doctor at work or his silhouette through the curtain and decipher the actions about what he is up to. Doctor makes a sudden appearance on the stage and in great panic orders Din

‘Go fetch a strong hammer quickly’

Having been handed with the implement the doctor disappears behind the curtain but soon makes another appearance, this time demanding a screw driver. Din getting all upset and confused gets the implement and gives it to the doctor who darts back inside, very much panic stricken. In a few seconds you could hear the doctor walloping the hammer on the screw driver at the same time as the yelling and screaming of the patient gets louder. Din plays insanity by now and throws himself about on the stage, worried sick for his wife and falls on the floor. Suddenly screams of the baby (played on tape) were heard and the doctor comes out sweating and panting but with a wide grin on his face.

‘Congratulations. You have a lovely girl and both the mother and baby are fine’

‘Thank almighty God and you! Doctor, you have saved my life. My wife Shaila is all I have in the world ’

Stopping him as he was leaving, Din grabbed his arm: ‘Doctor I was so worried, you know the screwdriver and hammer?’

'Oh that! I rushed my way up here and forgot the keys to my bag. I had to break open the lock and get my instruments for the job! And I was getting flustered'. Relieved, Din put his hands out, facing upwards: 'Thank you my God almighty: I thought those tools doctor wanted were used on my wife. I thought... I thought of dreadful things may have happened to my wife and the baby'.

Curtains were drawn as the audience went into a rupture of laughter. We laughed happy that we had succeeded in creating a theatre in the middle of a medieval Himalayan desolation. It was a happy ending to a fulfilled venture in a remote lonely recess of humanity.

Mohidin or simply Din assumed serious looks when he created humor and every word he uttered contained subtle wit. He was an asset in our local officer's fraternity and partially to me he was ready to do anything that pleased me. He was a character any film company would be proud to acquire. His face with high cheek bones and deep hallows where buccal fat pads normally reside expressed his nifty personality. I grabbed his arm instead of shaking hands and said words that would have meant a lot coming from me.

'Din you have done me proud! You have delighted the total audience!' A broad smile and a twinkle in his eyes said it all;

'You are the producer- director of the play, I blabbered my own words when words from the script escaped my memory'

All other friends including big Khan gathered round us. They were all praise for Din.

'You made a lot of people in the hall cry. They saw real tears rolling down your face and believed you had wife who was about to die or something' said Khan.

'Believe me there was no glycerin in my eyes. I just concentrated on my eyes and brought tears at will. Get me a job in films'

We heard people as they left the venue very pleased. The army officers congratulated me and offered help with clearing up the stage.

The police officer; Abdul Jabar Khan was barely visible behind his moustaches. He boasted about having won a prize for the bushiest moustache in the police force. The prize included promotion to the rank of deputy station officer posted in Gurez. He loved the job because you get to know all 40,000 people in the area and there was no crime. People settled their quarrels in the village and violence was rare. A fist or two have been raised but they never fall. The police had to survive and for them means of earning are essential and innovative. A trespass wandering into forbidden places, domestic squabbles were some crimes settled with bribe commensurate with how rich the party was and not the magnitude of offence.

Chapter 12

Mountain regime: internal cabinet for Governance

As we enter Gurez and the doors for the exit close behind us with all the snow covered mountains on all sides, the populations of living creations get concertinaed within and live in consort with inanimate and living objects of nature. In the times before the military descended in these parts the total governance was left to the few juniors in administration. It was like a small nation state governed by a local self government. How would a medical doctor ever get engaged in administration of a mini state was beyond any measure of comprehension for a budding doctor still thinking in terms of inchoate marvels he can performs in medical science.

The regime that held the reigns of a totalitarian control of this autonomous hamlet of population was constituted by three officials; the DRO (Deputy revenue officer) a junior in ranks. DRO was also the legal authority for law and order. Police department comprised of Arif Khan the Station House Officer. He was the chief executive for enforcement, deterrence and punishments. The medical officer was the senior gazetted officer with no experience of governance still held an honored place and on occasions played a part in governance.

The DRO was also the magistrate and would sit in judgment over all civil and criminal litigations. On his puny body he assumed a large head in physical and euphemistic terms and his name Sheikh Barkat Ali suited his authority. He was Sheikh to the common masses and just Barkat to the Police Officer and me. Always ready for a chat Barkat loved to have the last word in all conversations but his faculties were limited. He sidelined a conversation if it touched intellectual levels. I liked his thin moustache that stretched out like a rubber band each time he smiled then drew back to small size very quickly when he did not agree with an argument. He was not keen on using his scissors to trim hair emerging from his nostrils just in case he sneezed and the pointed end of the instrument gouged into his brain! , well that is how he explained his untidy nasal appearance.

The second- in- command was the (SHO) Station House Officer acting as the power arm of the executive. He was equally important. He had a bunch of cops working under him and always wore his uniform with two stars and carried a truncheon in his hand even when visiting socially. A big and burly tall man, I guessed he was made an officer for his physical strength, loud voice and gigantic moustache. There however was a downside to his awesome personality.

Slightest provocation, even a feeble joke normally enough to elicit a smile, would send him into a fit of unstoppable paroxysm of very loud laughter. He

would carry on laughing at peak levels till tears rolled down his cheeks, his eyes popped out and his face turned plum red. I had visions of him collapsing with a heart attack and wondering how much I could help him if that contingency arose. If he did decide to die on us, the consolation would have to be that he died happy with his lips wide open showing all his brilliant white teeth and the left upper premolar capped with gold. His materialistic and hedonistic slogan carried to his grave! Sometimes I would also start laughing unstopably not at the initial joke but just looking at him and his condition in perpetual laughter. The laughter was contagious. One incident that never left my thoughts when I reminisce over my days in Gurez was the excitement generated at a reception party.

Atmosphere was buzzing in all corners of Gurez that head of state Maharaja's son had flown in a military helicopter on an official visit. The meeting had an aura of regal splendor with army chiefs standing in frozen attention and three of us civil officers that flanked the prince looking pompous and inflated with authority. In the middle of these deliberations the erudite Prince making his long speech was interrupted by a prolonged squeak from the rear of congregation and it seemed the Prince paused to decipher its source and nature. It could be a warning shot from a distant enemy fire. It only turned out to be a squeak from an old chair. It startled the prince. We are too close to the border and this happened with pin drop silence outside.

In seconds Azmat pulled at my arm to extricate me from the meeting and at the gate beckoned me to run. Oblivious of what had transpired I was preparing myself for an emergency. We were running fast and those days I was always ready to run given a chance. The rest of the population was engaged with the Prince while we came to a stop after the sprint. He dragged me a good distance away behind the venue. We were now on our own in the fields and I was getting concerned. Suddenly he burst out laughing. After a long spell of his convulsion he managed to speak:

'I am sorry to drag you out. I wanted space and someone to laugh with' after one longer bout of laughter:

'Did you see his face? The way our Prince popped his eyes out when he heard the long beep? The Prince reacted as if someone had taken a short at him'.

'I noticed the Prince pause for a second or two but I thought he was lost for words! Anyway I still do not think it was so funny that you are in this state. I have warned you to restrain your urge for prolonged fits of laughter.'

I replied. This reprimand was not enough to shut his mouth and he was twitching all over with laughter again and now I joined him compulsively and we both looked at each other tearing rolling down laughing.

Suddenly we both realized that we were creating echoes in the foot hills and bound to be missed.

We must return quickly but I will explain my absence. I will say I was running for a quick reconnaissance round the outside and make sure no intruder was responsible for the noise'

Khan wanted space and a quite place to ventilate his urge for laughter and for five minutes he went into his usual convulsion of laughter. We were lucky not to be discovered by public holding hands in the middle of desolation, trees and countryside laughing loud while looking at each other in still darkness. Mind you the only place to report two adults gone amok would have been the police and doctor. They were both guilty! We made a quick return back to show our presence at the assembly while the Prince was concluding and our friend Barkat the revenue officer cum magistrate was at the dais.

There was me the least powerful in the cabinet but highest rank in official hierarchy. I was called upon in administrative matters as medical officer and only required in medico-legal cases. Even though DRO was a lower rank to me in official hierarchy, he had the powers to execute law and justice. Civil cases ended in arbitration and a settlement concluded in three-way split of the assets involved. One share went to the plaintiff; one was allotted to defendant and one for the

judiciary including police as bribe. I did not have a share in the spoils.

Wisdom would prevail on people not to seek justice because no one ended up with a net gain except the justice and police coffers. If the magistrate passed a sentence of imprisonment in a case, the police officer had a room behind his office to serve as prison. The prisoner would end up eating the left-over food from the policeman guarding him. A bill however was prepared in an ingenious manner by the SPO for meals served to the culprit.

The prisoner paid for cigarettes to his guard if he was to avoid a thrashing for fake charges of attempting escape. The prisoner inadvertently became a victim of long term incarceration if he started payment for favors. That compounded his sentence and worked as a deterrent so he would never ever beat his wife again or commit any other crime while he lived in Gurez. In all this process I also played an important role as I will explain.

People of Gurez rarely fought battles but if they did, the law and order machinery got activated as if woken from sleep. Normally it would be an uncharacteristic squabble, many a fists would be raised but very few would fall. It was only signs of injury on body that drew attention and that is where I came in. It was not to repair the injury but to certify the category of the damage done as a wound of simple or grievous nature.

A rich man had already negotiated a payoff for a simple injury he had caused on the other hand if the victim felt vindictive and offered bribe like a whole lamb then his injury would have a medico-legal consequence of a grievous nature and proffer more trouble for the perpetrator.

In a strange way this method of structuring and management of criminal justice system was self-regulatory and very efficient. Also the scheme of things was the cheapest dispensation of justice in the world. We the *mountain cabinet* were self-sufficient in playing the role. People avoided strife not because they were deterred by punitive law enforcement but the bribe they would have to pay no matter what degree of innocence or guilt they carried on their shoulders. In a way the judiciary apparatus would get worried if it was all peace and nothing at all happened. This is what a nation within a nation looks like if we take a spoof at the regime that administers population from metropolitan capitals.

Big Khan was easily flustered. He often remonstrated at the plight of the people:

"These people are pathetic. There is never a bloody crime here! Literally or otherwise these guys live like hermits. When was the last time a theft or punch up occurred? Our books are clean and we have not had any income for a long time. It is also the environment that plays tricks with us. It may be the cool setting outside that keeps their animal instincts dormant

because they never fight or beat each other. Winter time is worse. You don't see them. This huge population 40,000 strong hibernate so what happens inside their homes, only the animals that live in the house with them can tell'.

The big Khan was moaning and joking to his heart's content and I was chuffed full of curiosity. He noticed the smirk on my face that encouraged him to continue his grouching.

'It is alright for doctors, you can explode a virus bomb and an epidemic will get them! Then live chickens will start streaming in for you!' I interrupted to continue the light humor:

'The epidemics are egalitarian and would not spare you! What chickens would you get for me in your present economic state, if you were ill and needed an injection?'

I was careful not to be too funny in case I set him off in his usual laughter convulsions.

I always remember his pranks and practical jokes. One day a man arrived at the hospital with marks on his back. He was looking flustered and just managed to speak;

'I was given a beating by our police officer for no fault. It was the big burley Khan the SHO. They picked me up at the riverside. My pony was having a drink. He was going upstream fishing and I was way down. It looked like he had no luck with a catch. I only

watched from a distance. He ordered his men to catch me. I was in lock up for a good hour and I protested that my pony waiting outside will need to be given a drink. The officer came out in his half trousers and made me stand facing the wall. Then he walloped me with his cane hard as he could. When he had finished he said to his men 'Throw him out. I have stretched my arms and thank God my boredom is gone' I ran for my life, in case he changed his mind. My legs and back hurt but not enough to make me cry. I was now far away out of his reach and I shouted sir; You will forgive me ' You bastards ; You will be punished in Hell'.

Sheikh Barkat Ali the magistrate was also dusting his desk many times over and using his judicial powers to order his employees to brew tea and innovate anything to evade boredom. His proper engagement of dispensation of juridical matters seemed farfetched. He was always ready to receive friends like me during all hours for a chat and a game of cards. I paid visits because his hospitality was colorful, there was a table full of nuts and we ended up gambling in the house of justice. He was nevertheless a young revenue officer at the start of his career and wanted work like litigation, criminal justice matters or an episode of disorder somewhere. I made up words to console him:

'They also serve who stand in wait: This is an old adage. While you are sat in that chair ready with your tie and suit on; you are working'.

'Thank you; you are my best friend and always say the right things'

The quick movement from side to side of his moustache looked like spider legs scanning his mouth that fascinated me but I took my eyes off him quickly just in case he understood my mind. The consolation to humor my friend on this occasion was rewarded in addition to crispy bread, nuts and special tea with salt added to flavor. As if the prayer for business was answered by Almighty a delegation of villagers from Tulail the furthest hamlet in Gurez filled the compound where we sat out basking in the summer sun. They looked more like Central Asian than Kashmiris and spoke in a dialect the language we understand but with such an accent that makes it sweet and quirky. I was pleased to witness a glint of satisfaction in my friend and he instantly transformed into an all important judge and authority. He ordered all his staff to attention and signaled to me to sit back and be a part of the show.

Court in session

'What brings the whole family here? Have you written an application? You will need to register your case with my clerk and make it official before I can act'

He made the pronouncement to the crowd. I knew he was going to get them pay a fee for documentation. That may bring some income for the State!

'But on an informal level you may state your case'

He addressed me. 'This is for your benefit. Normally they are given a date for hearing,' 'Thank you, I am ever so grateful'.

I also knew he was desperate for work.

The tall man with a turban was the first to speak:

'Sir, it is the Jamal family. They live in the border village 10 miles away from us. They have deceived us. This is my daughter Tara. You can see she is dressed in a bridal dress. I spent all our earthly belongings including the last goat we had on this wedding. They liked my daughter and we liked the groom when the marriage was arranged last year. We arranged for Nikah (Muslim marriage) ceremony to take place but we used Vakil (agent) system who affirmed consent and marriage deed was concluded by the local priest. They arrived last night to our house for the final ceremony to take the bride home and consummate the marriage. The whole village received the party and we prepared a feast to feed them. We waited for the groom in the party. There was no sign of him. He finally arrived. They had dressed a man as the groom! Yes Sir! The wrong groom Sir! All dressed up impostor to take my daughter away. They got the village to witness the Nikah Nama deed and thumb impressions on it. The man is like her grandfather'.

Imposter bridegroom

Barkat Ali was engrossed and looking at me to see if I was getting interested. He orders his clerk.

'Take a full statement from everyone involved and their thumb impression', He let the man resume his statement.

'The groom looks a despicable character Sir. He is an old man bearing a resemblance to the boy we had seen. They insist we have agreed to accept him as our son-in-law; He looked at the bridegroom and said.

'Sir, I took this man's turban off. His head is like an eggshell. He is stone bald. Sir, we are devastated. My young daughter is ruined. She will kill herself if the marriage is forced upon her. The Nikah was written and our thumb impressions were appended by fraud.'

Suddenly a strange spectacle interrupted the proceedings. A rather emaciated little man at a guess in his seventies suddenly did a routine and somersaulted standing on his head. Throwing a cocked look at me from his inverted face not only to find empathy from my kind exterior but also to alert me to get ready for a medical emergency if he decides to die with his feet facing the Heaven!. I could see a tuft of white beard visible under his upside-down face. His half trousers and a flimsy robe on the ground uncovering his stomach covered with *Kangri* burns that I was familiar with in my practice. It simply amazed me at this extraordinary display of concern for the fate of his grand-daughter also aware of his constant gaze from underneath his body fixed on me. Was I

somehow involved in the catastrophe befallen on his family? A complete alien to this culture I was also shocked to find every individual present in these proceedings including my friend magistrate to be so nonchalant on the carnage of human dignity by a respectable elderly citizen of humanity in these mountains.

There were interruptions by other members of the delegation apparently furious and waving gestures of impending violence. The brother of the bride was the one who wanted to speak.

'Keep your voices down.' Ordered Barkat Ali the magistrate;

'I will have you all locked up'.

A dead silence followed. After a while, he continued 'Put that old man right way up and let him speak first.' The orderlies in seconds lifted the small man up in the air, spun him round on his feet. He was breathless and unable to utter words. The magistrate in desperation turned round and addressed the crowd:

'You are the brother, you can speak now.'

'Sir, I saw the groom only last year, and they introduced him to me as the man who wants to marry my sister. The man they have put on the horse today dressed as the groom is his elder brother. I know he has five children from his first wife and she lives with him. He works for the army as labor to bring water from the stream in his cowhide sac. That work made

him rich and he shows off the military shirt to bring awe from his army connection and now wants to get a second wife. They claim it was him we accepted and one year has made him older looking. His hideous resemblance is used to impersonate his younger brother who has been the charlatan. I will sacrifice my life and be hanged if I have to kill him.'

'I can see the face of the *crime* of mammoth proportions'

Declared DRO; He was so loud that I thought he needed to be assured he was right. It looked to me that he will need to consult a book on law. Knowledge of customary law or no knowledge, the court proceedings had already started. He shouted

'Where is the Priest who wrote the Nikah?'

To his waiting staff lined up behind in the distance:

'Issue a non-bail able warrant to arrest the priest. Get the SPO to send a policeman to get him.'

This order was not expected and all their faces dropped. DRO was aware the priest is a fat cat and he will pay a lot of money to be released. He explained:

'It is his fault to get thumb impressions on the Nikah document without obtaining consent from the correct bridegroom'.

'They are all liars sir and they have taken a lot of money' piped up the man from the opposite camp.

'Shut up or be arrested' shouts Barkat Ali.

In a trembling voice, the man who was stood upside down and the uncle of the girl pleaded:

'Sir, the Priest was also duped. They planted the younger brother before him and he gave consent. It was a plot. Being a local man he knew the consent was given by the younger brother. He was not sure of the names because both sound similar. He will make that statement.'

'Don't tell me my job, old man. He will have to be a part of the enquiry. I will also have the other family summoned to appear before this court'. Turning to his clerk

'I know the court is too busy at present but make an early date for the hearing and get all concerned.'

Three days later, I was given the rest of the story. Both police and DRO made money and came well out of this case. The priest was behind bars for the best part of the day, while the dowry was returned and the marriage was made null and void. DRO had consulted his law book and he used common law that states any deed between two parties becomes invalid if either party was under duress to sign or affix thumb impression in perfidy. The imposter was put behind bars and a case prepared against him for fraud. He will have to part with all the worldly goods he obtained from the employer, the army, to pay for his imprisonment and pay the total law enforcement establishments in Gurez.

I was not a part of this deal because no fists had fallen and no physical injury. I would get paid when I

certified grievous injury for which punishment is high but get more if I converted a simple to grievous or the other way round. Usually, it was a common consensus which is charged with what laws depending on who can pay the bribe. The poor man would suffer on both accounts; the beating he gets by his employer will have lost his wages and will lose his case. His hurt will be simple because the adversary pays money. I saw immorality in this practice and came in a clash many times. In a clever round up of the case everyone was implicated, or behind bars making everyone pay DRO, clerks, and police. The girl's parents paid for quick annulment of marriage deed.

As I will explain, I was fortunate to be a part of the cabinet. In a place like Gurez you must be friends with police and magistrate. On one occasion, I could have been in great trouble. I owed them a favor that I never had a chance to repay. It all happened during my second year of service in Gurez. I was late back from holidays and faced an early and fateful snowfall closing the Razdhani road. In this time police found a body floating in the stream. This is a border area with live politics and army dispersed in all available crevasses in the mountains.

A dead body could mean anything from a casualty from the enemy side or a warning shot to militants from the local military or worse still for me a murdered local civilian. The body was retrieved and preserved in the snow in a secret place. If the mountain cabinet

registers the discovery of a dead body of an unknown person, it would have to undergo a post-mortem by me. I am the only pathologist in the region and on my findings of death from natural causes or violence could the case be registered and murder investigation started or a formal burial conducted and the case filed.

My absence from duty was hidden from all including military and officials over the other side of the mountains including my officers. Tales were afloat that I was attending an emergency in Tulail 20 miles further deep in the ravine. The luxury of telephones was confined to the army. There was a dead body waiting in a makeshift morgue and the total gamut of governance in this part of the world held them in abeyance to hear a word about my whereabouts. My unauthorized absence was my dismissal incontestable that would defy my lifetime earning offered as a bribe to save my skin. While all this was happening behind my back, unaware of the hectic activities so uncharacteristic of placid Gurez I decided to extend my holiday and pay a visit to my college friends a thousand miles away in the East of India. My friends in the remote forsaken part of Kashmir were holding fast to the last strings of my job and my career as a doctor. I returned after almost a month with not even a banana as a gift for them to say thank you.

Fortunately, the dead body did not get a name. My cabinet colleagues invented the story that it was the work of a wild animal, possibly a grizzly and the victim

was a nomad from the other side of the border. It was unlikely Pakistan authorities would demand the return of a missing nomad. Kashmir has a long line of control between Indian and Pakistani occupied parts and cross border skirmishes have killed thousands of inhabitants on both sides. These people are therefore not accounted for. It was fortunate the dead body was never identified. The relatives would stir trouble. My two friends, the magistrate and policeman decided after a month of waiting to give the man a respectable burial. In any case, there were no perks attached to this case and it would make a lot of clerical work and explain with no benefits for anyone. The case was hushed to save a cabinet colleague...me!

No one has even thought of introducing alcohol or hard drugs to this population and not even the military have done that. That would change things and I could see crime and business blooming. They don't even wear trousers, what chance is there of a fight between them or any kind of crime in this fainéant place?' Remonstrating against this *eternal peace* in frustration, the police officer was moaning to me as we sipped the local green brew with honey. I agreed instantly. 'You know it is like the grave diggers!' I said, tactlessly making slight of his predicament.

'They could approach me to complain about 'no business' ploy that I kept them alive for too long, not many deaths. Why? Is it my efficiency or the mass inoculations I arranged or is the Goat (Priest) working

overtime, praying and keeping them ticking on! In his reliance on inherited primordial wisdom the gravedigger will keep his spade erected like a flag at his place of work for all to see. Showing spade meant no work. The business could only start streaming in if there was an epidemic! Or the military went on a rampage. Or of course with the prior consent of Providence a natural disaster strikes! The gravedigger would have to employ temporary labor to cope!

The police and magistrate would not only weep for the drop in income, but also their daily record books were clean blank sheets that would be an adverse discovery for their superiors as well. Every department had a visit or two in a year by higher up officers as I did as well. These visits were expensive because the higher office would descend on the hospitality of the subordinate as a party prepared for a long stay. There are no bedsits in Gurez, therefore, the lavish welcome and food and entertainment laid out was sustained by the department concerned on whose shoulder the party was forced.

Some officers demanded a share of bribes realized. What a waste of time despite the wonderful free holiday they enjoyed not to receive a substantial gift for taking home to their wives? That is why some crime had to happen or else fake entries were made. As soon as the snow melted on the mountain and a footpath surfaced visitors started coming. In my case, I had to invent a way to get a lamb or robust-looking

rooster that would be killed in their presence so they enjoy the meal and the holiday that followed it. A good report on your record as they left would mean the dishes they were entertained with were delectable or the gifts of bags of walnuts were inspirational.

I was sometimes tempted to be a part of the bribe triangle; the police, magistrate and the medic. A simple injury could be certified as grievous if I reckoned it would put the man out of work for a month or so. Then money would flow from both parties for mitigating punishment or enhancing it, depending on who paid what sum or paid in kind in terms of grain or meat. This was justice served in Gurez, and it worked. There were two occasions when I could cheat but managed to resist my temptation. It would have been for the help the magistrate and police needed to boost their income. As it happens, both parties were ready to pay the bribe. I had my private practice to supplement my income. However, the administration did return the favor to me in a big way as I will explain later. I had to certify sickness that enabled an employee of police to get back pay of a large sum. There was a share for the boss and similar certificate enables unauthorized absence to avoid dismissal.

Law and order apparatus fought battles but if they did it was a part of this team or the mountain cabinet and normally all problems were shared with a tacit understanding that we defended each other's interests.

In my second year of the tenure of service in Gurez, I made an unofficial trip home in the capital city. It was a risk I had to take because there were pressing issues at stake. My return to work was marred with a precipitous snowfall and the road open to jeep travel became impassable. This was a recipe for an end to my service because I left the hospital without prior permission and now I had no way of getting back on duty except to foot the 40 mile trek on foot for the second time. I knew my internal cabinet would not complain about whatever happened. Happen it did.

There was a case of assault by an angry husband and the woman had suffered injuries. The staff in the hospital stitched the wound on her back but there was the medico-legal side to attend. Who is going to certify if this was a grievous or simple injury? The sentence passed against the assailant would depend on the report. In order to cover my absence from duty the local government used out of court settlement and after a thrashing administered by the police officer, he was made to kneel before the wife, touching his forehead on the ground and stay in that position until such time the wife asked him to stand.

Epilogue

'Life' in my view is like the cogs of a wheel that keep turning epiphany and each circle the wheel makes it gathers new dust, new tumbles in the road and pot holes that rock it. Once having settled in Gurez I always had spiritual help and felt the wind behind me because I had a privileged place in this society of God's people. My first year went like a whirlwind very fast because my mind was taking in exciting events, learning process was working overtime, an endless task of blending in with the bliss nature provided. What time do we start work or finish? I did not even notice that figuratively there were no working hours at work except perhaps daylight and night time. There was no electricity anywhere past the last station of civilization in Bandipore, which is why every second of natural light was cherished. Light sources used ranged from resin filled trimmings from cedar burning to kerosene lit lamps and in offices and hospital gas lamps provided bright light to a limited area like the operating theatre.

There were no working hours in Gurez. The general pattern of life seems to start with the cocks and cows making the first noise and all the birds that follow by their singing in the symphony orchestra. People roll out of their beds unless they beat the sunrise for prayers that have to be said before even a ray of sun breaks through into the dawn. As if to blend in the panorama of the dawn mist women of Gurez are out in

groups carrying empty willow baskets to fetch firewood from the forests. Men are out in the fields or shops.

My hospital staff is geared up to follow the general routine and have completed their morning chores and some have got the worn out white coats on. My late rising habit altered but normally someone would hold the forte for me while I enjoyed my early hours in bed. We followed that pattern and it worked well. No one in Gurez gets overtime wages because you may be working all the time or none at all for months on end. It did however take a toll on me by the share world-weariness of routine, an easy ennui day full of comfort and luxury of animated living and very little by way of mental stimulation except reading what little material I could get hold of and read under an oil lamp.

It seemed I was getting to like a fainéant life style at my age of just past 23, cloying in indulgence of personnel attendance with a plethora of perks in goodness. I was conscious that no more fat accumulates in my flanks or the brain. I created ways for stimulation. I had no one from my profession to challenge my knowledge and expertise. I devised my own operations and modified treatments. There was a rumor that a herb from the jungle was effective in causing diuresis (increase urine) and reducing pain. I encouraged a local shop keeper to stock a brew made from the herb with added honey and a coloring. This had my mark of copy right for stones lodged in kidneys and urinary passages. In some patients it worked and helped to boost my moral

strength; that I provided a help devised by me and traditional cupping in cases of urinary stones. Some miracles did happen when stones were passed after administration of the medicine

I informed by telegram my Director Health services that I was taking four weeks off.

It was October time of 1960 and the region of Gurez-Tulail would be without medical care during my leave. Authorities understood that small illnesses people suffer would have to find their own cure or wait for a month and patients with more substantial problems could be transported on stretchers to Bandipore across the 40 mile trek over mountains. Both these devices would cost nothing to the State and in any case it would be impossible to find a locum for the month. There was acute paucity of doctors in Kashmir and only lucky parts of the population would benefit with the services of a qualified doctor. With a heavy heart and thankful for small mercies the people of Gurez bid me farewell for the four weeks. The residual medical care comprising the good old staff will have to make do in my absence.

I decided not to approach the army to let me share a lift in the jeeps they used as transport for their provisions and personnel and encouraged by the lively company offered by Din and the teacher we set off on foot. It was a forty mile walking trip across Razdhani that was very daunting prospect but full of promise of good company and joy of exploring mountains again.

I experienced the ordeal and pleasure of majestic mountains when they were covered with snow on my way in and what it was like when snow storms were wrenching at the peaks and blazing bright sunshine that marked the 13000 feet high pass in winter time. But it will be a different world now. I will be walking on actual paths carved out of rocks on meadows and was looking forward to explore new dimensions of mountain life. I was 23 and going on 24 years and at the prime of my health. During my college days I spent more time training to get prizes in sprints, ground and water sports, hockey and boxing matches than slogging in my studies. I had a built in endurance for any physical challenge. Now was the time to put those faculties to test. I had done the trek coming in by breaking for the night in Kanzalwan but this time it was a one day stint because there are no facilities for stop the nights in the forty miles.

It was crack of dawn there was a big crowd outside the hospital as soon as I emerged, all ready for the expedition and my companions for the journey were waiting. There was no special outfit and a simple trainer and old pair of jeans seem to be the ritual. Hyatt spent all night cooking meat balls and bread for my journey and made sure I had a few eggs, the green spongy bread, Tromba local smeared in honey because on its own it has a strong taste and a flask of coffee. An old lady from the crowd pushed past others saying in a forceful voice;

'You will cross those mountains and no harm will come to you. I had that told in my prayers. But you must be careful when you return. Here take this little pebble and clench on it hard when you see danger. Keep it in your pocket all the time you are crossing. It carries inside it recitations from the holy book'. She handed it to me with her frail hands, wearing a confident broad smile. I had seen the lady before but never as my patient. All the same I felt moved by this gesture:

'Thank you I will treasure it and I will remember you to all my people at home and I will remember to bring you something from the town on my return.'

Having said goodbye to the waiting crowd the party of three of us set off full of fervor and anticipation. Din the Food Officer had his home in Bandipore and made this trip many times. He is one man who made a lasting impression in my mind reminding me of his vivacious and amiable manner. A thin built he had dimples on both cheeks and a strong lower jaw. He was so amiable that anyone in his company would be charmed. He spoke in a soft local dialect that was sweet and pleasing. He made small talk sound very hilarious. This was the company I was looking forward to you. My only regret was that I would not be able to match his humor and treasure of stories he came up with. All the same it is these little jingles that put a spring in my step and I found myself cruising.

Communication is the key to development. A chunk of humanity left in isolation may lose ability to interact with the environment and fellow beings.

*Nostalgia is not what it used to be
A little known haven for all to see
Tales that defy belief*

Gurez has changed, the populations have proselytized, animals have receded to higher reaches and yet the might of mountains from Karakorum, Himalayas, Mount Goodwin Austin or K2 that stands proud at 28,250 ft, second only to its sister peak of Mount Everest 29000 ft that caps the world will stay to eternity. These glorious landmarks, denuded but mighty strong, riveting the plates of the earth to hold it together. It is Gurez where defiles of these peaks mellow down to foothills and valleys and humans shelter. Will they be there when humanity will have vanished.

In Gurez we have only known basic survival as humans, unchanged for centuries. Enlightenment and emancipation makes tracts in meager trickles greatly influenced by politics and natural phenomenon. Every hand of authority that reached our domain wanted from us allegiance and subservience but only a feeble care to replenish our desires and deficiencies in progress. We as People and our Mountains, our birds, our trout and the whispering trees desire to be left alone to live our lives as nature intended.

Sufi trail to paradise and my dream

Oh! Gurez

'I have missed you all these years.

Have you missed me?'

In my reflective moments,

I hear sounds from your Valley,

Reverberating in my mind

Agitating words never left my lips saying;

Every time I clamor for you and you are not there

Where is that mist your valleys were hiding?

The clouds that veiled your mountains

Like a bride covers were drawn

Across the splendor that was born

Hiding blossoms of heather and thorn

Birds honked in formation

Cravens telling stories,

O! Siraj the cloud nine that are

The blissful ruminants travelled far!

Where are you my Beloved?

Take me thither where you are.

The End



D-III-Done

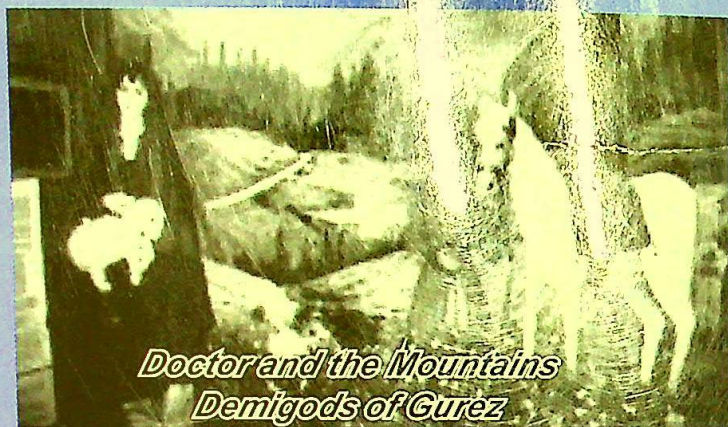
About the author



Dr Abdul Majid Siraj is a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and worked as a Consultant Surgeon in UK. Relieved of the commitment to the heavy workload at retirement he turned to write articles for newspapers and journals. There are two books to his name published in England that are derivative of the subject of social sciences. He obtained a diploma from Bradford University on international security and peace studies. These monographs carried the thematic spine in the singularity of the situation in Kashmir, the Himalayan region in political disarray. Two further books on the same subject were published and widely circulated in India.

The dominant vernacular was unfolding the cadence of the narrative in which the indigenous people play as actors and complement the theatrical production of both ethereal and ephemeral spectacle in politics. His book 'Laws and the Doctors' published in 2014 was highly acclaimed and forwarded by Soli J Sorabjee the top lawyer and former attorney General for India.

This master piece was launched by Mr. NN. Vohra former Governor of Jammu & Kashmir in Raj Bhavan with the audience of the Principle and staff of the Medical College Srinagar. LexisNexis the world famous publishers launched the second edition in 2016. This background and experience in research served the author as the foundation for a storyline to write this book on Gurez, a place very close to his heart.



Doctor and the Mountains *Demigods of Gurez*

Escapades of a practicing doctor in Gurez depicting the remarkable challenges he faced at every step of his perilous journey to reach places and carry out treatments.

On either side of epiphany in mountains there were amazing revelations. What followed is chronicled in this book compiled as an anthology of disparate events as they took shape. Each story ended in a philosophical discovery. Mountains of Gurez have compelling beauty, power and personality. They inhabit demigods. Each story is a manifestation of an important event. For that reason alone if we open at random any page of the book to read, a new story will unfold. The narrative in the first person is based on experiences true to that period of time and reflects a sequence of events in its history passed on to the author by the indigenous people. The spine of the total project revolves around the practice of traditional medicine faced with a testing environment of epiphany within the mountains of Gurez.

The demigods that are omnipresent look after people within snow-clad mountain ranges while they remain incarcerated for six months of the year with little hope of travel across in an emergency. What happens if the doctor faces a serious health problem himself? It is a daunting prospect as we shall see.